NOVEL
06
WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
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Monda
TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

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A fighter jet with enormous black wings cut through the canopy, carrying spare parts to replace Arroganz's broken limbs. I purged the damaged limbs and discarded the container on my Armor's back. As it fell, Schwert swooped to dock in its place.
"It's every boy's dream to pilot a robot that can combine with others to make a super robot."
"Yes, well, pardon me for not being able to become a giant robot."
"Dummy. That wasn't a dig."
Once Arroganz's lost limbs were replaced, we dodged through the Sacred Tree's branches and flew up. The Demonic Suit raced after us.

As Miss Louise hugged me, she began to cry.
“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m really... really sorry.”
I hesitated, wondering if I should call her “Big Sis,” but I decided against it. I worried I’d ruin the mood, so it was better to just let her borrow my body in silence instead.

Trapped in a Dating Sim
The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs

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06

WRITTEN BY
YOMU MISHIMA

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Seven Seas Entertainment

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 6

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Illustrations by Monda

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THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

Prologue

BETRAYAL ALWAYS HAPPENS suddenly. It's not scary or unnerving when you can see it coming. The issue is that the traitor always waits for the perfect time to strike, when it will hurt the most.

And that's exactly what's happening here!

"Mr. Leon, keeping hush-hush is a big no-no! You have to tell us what's going on, okay?" Olivia adorably tilted her head. Although her eyes were smiling, they gave off a menacing aura, indicating she would under no circumstances permit me to lie my way out of this one.

I, Leon Fou Bartfort, trembled under the power of her gaze. Intending to make some excuse, I opened my mouth to say something, but my throat was so parched that I couldn't even find my voice. My nerves got the better of me.

"Let's just calm down for a sec, o-okay?" I said. "Once we've cooled our heads, we can put this misunderstanding to rest. Plus, I swear to you guys, this was all a trap set by Luxion. I've been framed!"

While I protested my innocence in vain, Angelica Rapha Redgrave glanced at the baby bed in the room. She reached over and touched it, smiling. But the way she smiled sent a chill down my spine.

She is definitely pissed. Hers is the cold, quiet kind of anger that simmers beneath the surface.

If I were to liken her current emotional state to anything, it would be a volcano seconds before an eruption. I had to tread carefully, lest I set her off.

More importantly, why was I in such a pickle to begin with? What the hell had I done?

"I want you to come up with an excuse plausible enough to convince us," said Angie. "While studying abroad here in the republic, you brought another woman to your temporary residence, and you prepared a baby bed for her as well. You'd better have a good explanation."

It wasn't like I could've stayed at Marie's place forever, so I'd recently returned to the house that had originally been prepared for my stay. Furthermore, Noelle Beltre—whose real name was actually Noelle Zel Lespinasse—was the Priestess chosen by the Sacred Tree Sapling, and in order to protect her, I'd brought her along to live with me.

There was no other meaning behind it, I swear! I only brought her here to shield her from all the idiots in this country. Since Noelle had been chosen as Priestess, the republic desperately wanted to get their hands on her. I'd figured the safest place for her was at my side. She also wanted to stick with me, so there was no problem with our arrangement. At least there shouldn't have been.

Noelle stared at the floor. Her blonde hair was pulled into a side ponytail on the right, the color turning pink at the tips. As she stood in front of Livia and Angie, her expression became strained with guilt. “I-I’m so sorry. I’m the one in the wrong here. I’m the one who got carried away.”
The more apologetic she looked, the more Livia and Angie glared at us.
“Wh-why don’t we all take it down a notch,” I said, unable to stop my nervous stutter. “Noelle, I-I-I… I’ll do the t-talking. I-I’ll fix this m-misunderstanding.”
Urgh! I’m so terrified of them that my voice is cracking all over the place.
I hadn’t cheated at all, but merely being suspected of it had shaken me to the core. Worse yet, we’d been caught in a situation that made it difficult to deny their accusations. My fiancées had entered the house at the worst possible moment, whereupon they just so happened to see me and Noelle messing around. Unfortunately, without context, it *would* kind of look like I was having an affair. The baby bed in the corner certainly didn’t help matters.
I had befriended a guy named Jean when I first got here, and for a while, I’d looked after his beloved pet. She was an elderly canine who required extra care, so I’d acquired a baby bed for her to sleep in. The problem? Like the woman beside me, said canine’s name was also Noelle, and that only further complicated the situation.
From Livia and Angie’s perspective, I had invited another woman into my home and even prepared a baby bed for our future child. If you were to ask ten random people whether it looked like I was cheating, every single one of them would almost definitely say yes. If I weren’t the guy in question, I’d probably agree.
But let’s get one thing clear here: I did *not* cheat.
Despite my innocence, I’d found myself in my current predicament thanks to Luxion’s betrayal. I normally never would have let myself get caught in a situation that could be so easily misunderstood.
So why was this happening? Because Luxion was an evil bastard.
Okay, I need to put my brain in overdrive and think my way out of this. It’ll be fine. I suck at talking nice, but as long as I’m sincere, surely they’ll believe me.
“Girls, I want you to think carefully. If, hypothetically speaking—and I mean completely hypothetically, because I didn’t do it—I had cheated on you, which I definitely haven’t! I swear to you! But let’s assume for a second that I had. Don’t you think this situation is a little odd?”
The second I mentioned *theoretically* two-timing, Livia and Angie’s eyes turned cold and hostile. Another chill ran down my spine. I shuddered.
“Odd? Quit playing games and get to the point,” Angie snapped icily.
I swore to myself then and there that I would never, ever cheat. Pissing them off was way too scary, and I *never* wanted to do it again. This one experience had taught my brain—no, my heart—no, my *soul* just how much I never, ever wanted to repeat the experience.

Livia tore her gaze from me and put a hand over her mouth. “I admit, it is a bit strange.”
“Livia?” Angie’s eyes shifted away from me.
Thankfully, Livia understood what I was trying to get at.
“Even though we came all the way to the Alzer Republic to see you, you didn’t come to the harbor to greet us. We didn’t give you advance notice last time either, but you managed to get intel about our arrival, right? Which is why you came to welcome us.”
“Yes, Luxion must have told him, right?” Realization dawned on Angie’s face. “Oh. Now I get it.” She nodded to herself and proceeded to say exactly what I was thinking. “If you had intended to keep this a secret from us, then you would have done away with the evidence before we ever arrived. The fact that you didn’t means Luxion said nothing to you beforehand.”
That jerk normally gave me so many reports that it was truly annoying, but this time, he hadn’t made a peep. It was clear he’d stabbed me in the back!
Livia nodded. “Cleary was acting weird too. If Mr. Leon were really trying to hide something from us, wouldn’t she pitch in to buy him extra time? Between the two of them, there wouldn’t be any evidence left for us to find.”
Yeah. Yeah, exactly! Normally, those two would have made sure I knew beforehand that you were coming. They are ridiculously capable AI, after all. They would definitely have helped me do away with any evidence of wrongdoing!
Actually, no. They wouldn’t have. Besides, I hadn’t done anything wrong!
“Exactly!” I agreed. “This proof is only proof that they betrayed me.”
The air was clear now that the two of them had come to that realization themselves. This had to be the power of love.
While my shoulders sagged with relief, the woman wearing glasses who had watched the whole scene unfold suddenly blurted out, “Even so, it’s an undeniable fact that the two of them were together in this room, flirting.”
This twerp—Cordelia Fou Easton—was a maid who Angie had sent along to help take care of me. I’d thought she was a coolheaded, rational person like myself, but it seemed she was no less a traitor than those other two turncoats.
Hold up. Does this mean everyone around me is a backstabber?
Angie turned her gaze back toward me. It had softened moments before, but with Cordelia’s grim reminder, she was once again glaring. “In which case, perhaps Luxion had his own complaints about whether his master may have been acting a bit out of control, hm?”
“That certainly is a possibility,” said Livia. “Perhaps he set this up for Mr. Leon to learn the hard way that his behavior has gotten out of hand.”
“Luxion certainly is a loyal servant. You’re lucky you have an intimate who’s willing to reprimand you for your misbehavior,” said Angie.
“Y-yeah, I’m not so sure about that…” I frowned.
I didn’t like where this was headed. I considered trying to change the course of the conversation, but I didn’t think running my mouth was going

to get me out of this. I turned my pleading gaze to the other people gathered and spotted Yumeria. I prayed she would lend me the help I needed.
Is she picking up on my signals?
Amid the heavy atmosphere, Miss Yumeria plucked up her courage to speak. “Uh, um…”
Bless you, I’ll never forget your bravery!
*“*Mr. Leon is a man, after all,” Yumeria said. “I think his demons got the better of him!”
Well, that’s one way to pour more fuel on the fire.
No, given the situation, it was more like throwing an explosive into an already raging inferno. She made it sound like it was a fact that I really had been two-timing.
Miss Yumeria flinched as she realized she’d only dug my hole even deeper, and she quickly tried to smooth things over. “Th-that’s not what I meant. Um, I mean to say—they just got a little carried away, messing around with each other. Um, uh, err… At any rate, Mr. Leon hasn’t broken his vow of monogamy to you two! Oh, wait… I suppose since there’s two of you, that’s not exactly monogamous, is it?”
True. By definition, having two fiancées meant I wasn’t really mono-anything.
This situation really couldn’t get any worse. And to top it all off, I was flying solo. Livia and Angie probably wouldn’t believe anything Noelle said. Cordelia seemed to have no interest in taking my side either, and for all her good intentions, Miss Yumeria was no help. The two AI who were supposed to help me out of situations like this, Luxion and Cleare, were absent and had made no move to rush to my defense. The odds that they were fully turning their backs on me were pretty high.
What am I saying? Obviously they already turned their backs on me, or I wouldn’t be in this situation. Damn rotten AI!
“AI are destined to betray mankind after all, I guess,” I muttered bitterly. It was a constant plot point in many books and movies. Luxion was no exception, apparently.
Screw this! I swear I’m going to get revenge on him—no, them—someday!
“I bet you’re listening in, aren’t you, Luxion? You won’t get away with this. Mark my words, humanity will claim victory in the end! Just you wait, I’m going to be your doom!” I belted out these words and started cackling, certain he was watching. I had no choice but to laugh to keep from crying. My odd behavior made Noelle jump in surprise, while Miss Cordelia pulled a face, disgusted. The reaction that really got to me was Miss Yumeria’s. She frowned at me with genuine concern.
“Mr. Leon, please get ahold of yourself. It’s going to be all right. I promise you, it surely will be,” she said.
What part of this do you think will be all right? But thanks for worrying at least. I do love that kind heart of yours.

As I continued chuckling dryly, Angie and Livia each grabbed one of my elbows and clung tight. Under normal circumstances, I would have felt like the luckiest guy in the world, having two beautiful women on my arms, but they were definitely only trying to hold me in place so I couldn't escape. Their smiles were dark, and my bones creaked under the pressure of their grasps.

"Mr. Leon, you're going to tell us everything, okay? Keeping anything from us is a big no-no."

"You're going to spill every last detail," Angie agreed. "We have plenty of time. Don't you dare think you'll be getting any sleep tonight."

Normally, I would have blushed if she said that to me—I would have assumed she meant it sexually. Keyword here being "normally."

They kept a firm grip on me as they dragged me out of the room.

"Leon?!" Noelle called after me, stretching out her hand.

I craned my neck back and pulled my lips into a stiff smile. "Don't worry, Noelle. Once I talk to them, I'm sure they'll understand."

I was innocent. I hadn't actually been two-timing. I was sure if I explained everything to Livia and Angie, they would understand. All we had to do was talk—

"Mr. Leon, this time really was a big no-no, you know."

Surely if we—

"It seems like we need to give you a good lecture about your relationships with the opposite gender. I won't forbid you from messing around, but you'll need to be prepared for the consequences if you do."

I'm not coming back alive from this, am I? I sank. "Luxion, why did you betray me?"

As they escorted me along, my shoulders slumped and my gaze dropped to the floor. I felt like a criminal who'd been clapped in irons.

But I haven't cheated, I swear! I haven't done anything wrong—not a single thing!

***

The Alzer Republic's academy was on winter break. Lelia Beltre decided to use that free time to adventure into a dungeon. Her pink hair was pulled into a side ponytail, just like her older twin sister, Noelle. The only difference was that Lelia's ponytail was on the left while Noelle's was on the right. The two shared a great resemblance, but key differences distinguished them. On top of that, Lelia had reincarnated into this world from another one.

"Here. It's here. I've seen this before."

Lelia's clothes were covered in dirt, and she was shouldering an enormous rucksack. She carried a pickaxe in her hand, and her appearance made obvious that she'd struggled to make it this far. She was huffing and puffing, completely out of breath.

Serge Sara Rault, who had accompanied her, fussed. “Hey, you okay? It’s no good to push yourself.”
“Don’t worry about me. As long as we make it to our destination, I’ll be fine.”
“Uh-huh. Well, I’ll give it to you, I’m surprised you knew about this place.”
Serge was a rough around the edges sort of guy with sun-kissed skin and combed-back black hair. He was also tall and muscular, the complete opposite of Lelia’s fiancé, Emile Pleven; Lelia had good reason for coming to this dungeon with him.
Serge surveyed the area, which was covered in the Sacred Tree’s roots, which had pierced through what appeared to be a metal wall and tangled around it. The way they had weaved through the corridor made it impossible for most of the doors within to open. Some were completely warped, and others merely led to a room invaded by tree roots.
Serge lifted his lantern in his left hand, illuminating their surroundings. “Never thought to find a dungeon right beneath the Sacred Tree. Lelia, this is a pretty huge find, yeah?”
They had ventured underground, making their way to an area immediately below the Sacred Tree.
Lelia pulled out her water bottle and took a swig before wiping her mouth. She didn’t look like a prim and proper lady right now, but she didn’t have the luxury to care about that. “Keep this a secret, okay? It’ll cause all kinds of problems if other people start wandering in here. Also…” She glared. “Hey, Serge, are you listening?”
Serge was eyeing her with fascination. “Don’t get pissy. I was just thinking about how awesome you are.”
“What?” What nonsense was he going on about?
While Lelia struggled with how to respond, Serge started walking again, leading the way.
“I mean, I like how you don’t pretty yourself up.”
“Yeah, I get it. I’m totally unrefined.” Lelia pouted, having interpreted Serge’s remark as a passive-aggressive dig. Her mind, however, was more preoccupied with the future.
Leon discovered Luxion in Holfort Kingdom. That means that it must be here in the republic as well.
Yes, just as Leon had discovered a cheat item in his home country, the republic—where the second installment of the otome game series took place—would have one as well. Like Luxion, it was a cash shop item.
It has to be here. It just has to. I’ll be devastated if it isn’t. Without it, I won’t be able to stand on even footing with Leon.
Lelia was terrified of Leon, or more precisely, his ridiculously powerful AI, Luxion. If Luxion put his mind to it, he could sink the entire continent. Leon had said as much to her, and she had since lost all composure. That was why she’d resolved to locate a cheat item of her own. The only issue was that she couldn’t go by herself to collect it. However, despite being a noble,

Serge was an adventurer. Lelia had relied on him and his skills to reach this point.
The path ahead was dark as Lelia inched forward. Tree roots ran across the floor, and she tripped on them time and again, only for Serge to catch her before she could fall.
“Why don’t we take a little break?” he suggested.
“I-I’m doing fine. It’s only a little farther. Let’s keep going.” The cheat item was only a few steps away. Memories from the time Lelia had played the game came flooding back. *I’m almost there. Once we get past that door, it’ll be mine.*
An enormous steel door towered in front of them. There was a control panel nearby, where Lelia paused to input her PIN number.
Good thing I remember it.
She had only managed to recall it thanks to a mnemonic she’d made up a long time ago. Once she punched in the numbers, the door emitted an audible click. With clumsy hands, Lelia slid the doors open, finding a spacious room waiting on the other side.
Serge gaped, turning his gaze to her. “You knew how to open that thing?”
“It’s a long story. Now come on, let’s go.” Lelia held up her lantern, illuminating the space. A number of gigantic tree roots were in this room as well. *This place is bigger in person than it looked in the game.*
Lelia started searching the area for an airship—or rather a spaceship, to be more precise. This wide, open area was supposed to be a dock. In the distant past, the old humans’ weapons had lined this room from one end to the other. Time had left most of them derelict. They were but phantoms of the past standing as a perpetual reminder.
“This is amazing!” Serge gushed. “Lelia, this is a huge discovery! If we report this place, we could go down in history!”
Not only had they found a new ruin, but it still housed a mountain of ancient relics. As an adventurer, Serge couldn’t help his excitement. Lelia didn’t share his sentiments.
“There’s something even better here,” she assured him. “Follow me and don’t lag behind.”
She pulled him along and continued forward. It didn’t take long to make a discovery; when Lelia shone her lantern toward the wall, she found something embedded in it. Its shape was almost human, ensnared in tree roots.
“Is this…an Armor?” she wondered.
Lelia had never seen this thing in the game, but perhaps it was simply that her memory was fuzzy and this was just another of the many cash shop items. The whole weapon aspect of the game hadn’t left much of an impression on her. In fact, she had considered the battle and adventure aspects of the game an unnecessary drag.
Serge stepped closer to the Armor. “It’s not in bad shape, but it’s got a hole right through the chest. Whoever was piloting it must have died instantly.”

A ripple of fear ran through Lelia. What if that pilot's spirit was still wandering these ruins? That thought alone made her paranoid; what if the place was haunted?
"H-hey! Knock it off."
"Since it's not in bad condition, why not take it back with us? Although the whole thing looks kinda weird, all black and covered in spikes like that. Wonder if that kinda design was mainstream back in the old days. Not to mention, the thing is huge."
It was far bigger than most modern Armors. As Lelia studied it, she was reminded of a similar suit.
"Huh? This thing kinda looks like Arroganz."
"Arroganz?" Serge echoed. "Oh yeah, I think I've heard that word before. It means hubris, right?"
"What? It does?" Now that Lelia knew the meaning, she was even more disgusted with Leon. What is he, some kind of delusional nerd? What kind of person names their own Armor something like that?
Lelia continued staring at the Armor trapped in the tree roots as she derided Leon in her mind. Suddenly, a chill ran down her spine.
I-I'm not sure what it is about this thing, but…it gives me the creeps.
She retreated a step back, intimidated.
Serge, on the other hand, seemed positively enamored. "Lelia! Let me have this. I'm not gonna pilot it, I swear. I'll just use it for decoration."
"You can't!" Lelia rejected the idea without missing a beat. Not because she had weighed the pros and cons, but because her own intuition was screaming. "Anyway, hurry up. We gotta keep moving."
"What? Hey!"
Lelia seized Serge's arm and pulled him along. He tried to resist at first, but the moment she put her hands on him, he went quiet. The two continued walking, their arms linked.
Eventually, a colossal spaceship came into view. It had a simple, angular shape, and it was trapped in a tangle of tree roots. The paint job on the outside appeared to be some shade of green. While the other ships stationed in this dock were falling apart from neglect, this one stood out as the only one practically in mint condition.
Serge gawped, craning his head back to take it all in. "The ancients used to have airships this ridiculously huge?"
It's not an airship, Lelia inwardly corrected. This is a spaceship. Or if we're going to be technical, a space warship.
As much as she tried to remember the specifics of the otome game, her memory was spotty at best, giving her only a faint recollection. This ancient spaceship was actually a supply vessel with high specs and combat capabilities. Weapons like this from the distant past were made with a level of engineering that made modern technology look like baby's first building blocks. Timeline-wise, it had probably been created at around the same period as Luxion.

With this in my hands, I won't be losing to Leon or his AI.
Serge was frozen in place, staring slack-jawed at the ship. Lelia turned to leave him behind, but he scurried after her. Panicked, he grabbed her hand and yanked her back.
"It's coming!" he bellowed.
"Huh? Wh-what is?!"
Before Lelia's mind had a chance to digest what was happening, monsters flew out at them. Serge began smacking them down with his bare fists. They collapsed on the ground, disappearing in puffs of black smoke.
D-did he really just beat those beasts to death with his bare hands?!
Serge stopped to flex his right wrist, twisting it around as one of the monsters evaporated in front of him. In his left hand, he now held a spear. Still more creatures lurked around them, lying in wait. Serge cracked his neck back and forth, preparing to take them down. Despite their situation, he looked confident and relaxed.
"Nine left, huh? Lelia, stay behind me."
"Y-you sure you can take them down? We're totally outnumbered."
Serge grinned at her before brandishing his spear and stepping forward.
"Oh, I'm sure."
The fight that ensued was entirely one-sided. Each time Serge swung his spear, he either shredded or impaled one of the monsters. Since he revered adventurers so much, he had trained his body well. He was the most battle-ready of all the love interests in this installment.
Serge took down every beast that appeared before him with ease. One towered over him, but even it was no match as his spear plunged through the back of its head. The sight made Lelia's stomach lurch. These grisly monsters resembled flying sharks, and as gruesome as it was, Lelia was grateful to Serge for taking them down. She couldn't have done it on her own.
Bringing Serge along was the right decision. He's so strong. I bet he's even tougher than Leon and his gang.
Holfort Kingdom was the birthplace of adventurers, so Leon and his allies were all muscular and toned. But as far as Lelia could tell, Serge was no less fit than any of them. In fact, if what she was seeing now was any indication, he was even stronger than Leon.
"And that's the last of 'em!" Serge announced. He had disposed of the creatures in a matter of minutes. Once he was sure the area was clear, he stowed his spear.
"Y-you…really are strong," Lelia gasped, impressed and grateful. "I feel like I've seen you in a new light!"
"Can't make it out of any dungeon alive if you can't do at least this much," said Serge. "So? Have you fallen for me?"
"Nope, but I have revised my opinion. Thanks for protecting me."
That brief exchange seemed to lighten the tension in the air.

Serge turned his gaze back to the supply vessel. He seemed lost in thought, which prompted Lelia to tilt her head. “What is it?”
“Nothing. I was just thinking, it’s kinda odd we made it here so easily when there’s treasure ripe for the taking.”
Lelia shrugged. “We struggled plenty just getting to this point. There were numerous points where I was sure I was going to die.”
Since she wasn’t accustomed to adventuring, Lelia felt like they’d walked a tightrope of death the whole time. There had been more than enough danger as far as she was concerned. Serge, meanwhile, seemed disappointed by the lack of action.
“It just feels weird because we walked a straight path to get here. It’s shocking how smoothly the whole thing went. Did you know this treasure was here all along?”
If she affirmed, he would probably ask how she’d learned. Thankfully, Lelia had an excuse prepared. “I didn’t *know* it would be here, you know. I just happened to hear something about it a long, long time ago.” By insisting she was equally surprised, she managed to weasel her way out of any further intrusive questions.
Lelia came to a stop at the entrance to the ship. As if it sensed a presence, the door opened without her having to do anything. Unlike the rickety door she’d had to pry open to get here, this one slid smoothly. Inside, a metal ball was hovering in the air at eye level with Lelia. It was about the same size as a soft ball, with a red lens in the middle.
The moment the robot appeared, Serge whipped out his weapon and jumped in front of Lelia. He kept his spear at the ready as he shielded her. “Get back, Lelia!”

Lelia, however, was relieved. This robot, like Luxion, was a remote terminal. The only difference between them was its blue cladding. “Serge, calm down. It’s all right.”
“Y-you sure about that?” Serge refused to lower his weapon, eyeing the robot warily.
Lelia was certain this AI held no animosity toward them. After all, it was the same as Luxion. It wasn’t made for battle.
“I would like to speak to you,” she said.
The robot chirped back cheerfully, “It has been quite a long time since I had guests.” Its voice, while robotic, was smooth and deep, similar to a man’s. It certainly expressed more emotion than Luxion.
Serge’s eyes widened with surprise, but Lelia ignored him and continued. “I would like to have this ship. I want to register myself as your master.”
“You want me? Hm. Your manner of inquiry does pique my curiosity, and I’ll admit I’m tired of waiting on standby; I cannot leave this place of my own accord, you see. Thus, it would be most convenient to have a master.” The AI was most likely suspicious of how she had known about its existence, let alone that it could register someone as its master, but it was sick enough of being stuck that her offer tempted regardless.
Serge glanced worriedly at Lelia. “Are you sure this is okay? What is this thing?”
Before she could answer, the AI beat her to it. “Oh, my apologies. I didn’t even bother to offer my name, did I? You may call me Ideal. Supply Vessel Ideal, at your service.”
Lelia breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness. He’s got the same name as in the game.
Since Ideal’s name matched what she remembered from the cash shop, she was assured that what she saw in front of her was indeed a cheat item.
Lelia took a step forward. “In that case, please register me as your master immediately.”
“And how, precisely, would you know about master registration? You seem like an endless fountain of curiosities, but I suppose you want me to prioritize making you my master first?”
Light shot out of Ideal’s red lens as he scanned the two of them. He started circling Lelia, intrigued by her.
“Wh-what is it?” she demanded.
“You have given me some very interesting data. Today promises to be a very good day indeed.”
Lelia had expected something more robotic, having seen the way Luxion interacted with Leon, but Ideal was personable. In fact, he remained polite even after recognizing her as his master.
“The two of you appear to be exhausted from your journey. I will prepare rooms for you so that you can rest. Well? Come inside.” Ideal floated forward, guiding them.

As they moved deeper into the ship, Lelia was shocked by its beautiful interior.
Serge shared her sentiments, tracing his hand over the wall. “I’ve never seen a Lost Item in such perfect condition.”
Those words must have roused Ideal’s interest again because he glanced back at them. “A ‘Lost Item,’ you say? I suppose the techniques used to build me have likely been lost to time. I am looking forward to seeing the outside world.”
“‘Looking forward to it’?” Lelia eyed him, exasperated. “You seem awfully full of emotion for an artificial intelligence.”
“You truly are fascinating,” Ideal said as he turned his attention forward and continued navigating for them.
“Hey, Lelia,” Serge cut in from behind. “What’s an ‘artificial intelligence’?”
Crap! I completely let my guard down! Lelia slapped a hand over her mouth.
“I-It’s nothing for you to worry about. Anyway, let’s rest here for now.”
“Smart thinking. I’d like to look around and see the rest of the ship, though.” Anxious to see more, Serge let his gaze wander, excited by the prospect of the unknown.
Lelia turned her gaze to Ideal, who was still leading them. Finally, it’s mine. Now that I have my hands on a cheat item, I won’t have to keep trembling in fear around Leon and his gang.
Having Ideal on her side brought her great relief.
“Wait here for a bit.” Ideal led them to a room that to all appearances seemed to be a break area. There were couches, vending machines, and decorated plants inside.
Serge plopped himself down on one of the couches without bothering to dust off the dirt covering his clothes. “This is pretty comfy. Lelia, have a seat!”
“You really are crude. Not that it matters, I guess.” Lelia lowered herself onto one of the cushions, and the exhaustion that had built up from all the walking they had done finally hit her.
Ideal left them behind and started toward the door. “All right, I’ll be off then.”
“Where are you going?” Lelia demanded.
“I have to make preparations for our departure. I will have some food brought to you soon enough. Please relax and unwind in the meantime.”
Once he was gone, Serge grinned from ear to ear. “Gotta hand it to him. He’s a considerate one.”
Lelia had to wonder if a supply vessel like this even had any rations left after the centuries it had spent on standby. The question nagged at her mind, but she soon felt the weight of Serge’s gaze and turned toward him. He pressed his face close.
“H-hey!” Lelia yelped. She thrust her hands out to push him back, but he caught them and tugged her closer. His eyes were deadly serious.
“Lelia, why’d you get engaged to someone like Emile?”

A sharp pang of guilt hit her square in the chest. She was well aware of Serge's feelings for her. "Th-that's got nothing to do with you. Besides, you're the one who hasn't been to the academy in forever. It's not like I had any chances to talk to you. Why? You got a problem with it?" She could already guess what he wanted to say.
Serge narrowed his eyes, gritting his teeth. "You know how I feel, don't you? Lelia, I like you. I *love* you."
His words were earnest, but that only made her avert her gaze.
"I love you." Those are the cheapest words in the world, Lelia thought, recalling her previous life. She shook her head.
"It's too late for that now. I'm with Emile." Lelia stood and put some distance between them, but Serge only chased her down, catching her by the shoulders and turning her to face him.
"I swear I'll make you happy. Come to my side."
His expression was so sincere that her heart wavered, but she still managed to push his hands off. "Serge, enough kidding around. I mean, you're House Rault's heir, aren't you? There's too big of a difference between your status and mine."
"If you wanna talk about status, then Emile's in the same boat. What's that got to do with anything anyway? My feelings for you—"
As the two were busy bickering, Ideal barged into the room, his cheerful voice echoing.
"You know, it's been so long since I prepared food like this. Oh, but don't worry. The ingredients have been properly stored, so they haven't spoiled. In fact, I'm able to produce a certain number of ingredients on this ship. If it's food you want, I can have it ready for you in no time!" He paused. "Hm? Were the two of you fighting?"
An awkward tension hung in the air. With Ideal's entrance, the two dropped the conversation. Lelia pulled away from Serge and crossed her arms over her chest. "Nothing for you to concern yourself with," she said.
As I suspected, AI really don't understand human emotions at all.
Lelia was a bit sour with Ideal for not reading the room.

Chapter 1:
Human Garbage

"AND THERE YOU have it. It is true that Master looked after a canine in the past that was named Noelle, and later, he saved the woman named Noelle Beltre. While everyone seems to suspect him of cheating, he lacks the nerve to even try it, rest assured."

We were in my house, where Luxion finally stepped in after Angie and Livia had dragged me off to interrogate me, their eyes dark and menacing. I'd spent a whole hour being grilled, but no excuse I threw at them remedied the situation, at least not until Luxion swooped in.

Angie rested her hands on her hips and sighed. "I guess that means we jumped to conclusions. Leon, I hope you'll forgive us. We were in the wrong here."

"I am so sorry, Mr. Leon." Livia threw her arms around me. "I guess you didn't cheat on us after all. I feel awful for doubting you."

I accepted their apologies with an open heart. "You don't need to apologize. It's my fault for giving you cause to suspect I was betraying your trust."

After reassuring them, I glared at Luxion and Cleare. "But you two are a different story. Mark my words, I'll make you pay for this."

The AI averted their gazes.

Luxion even had the nerve to act exasperated with my antics. "Oh, how closed-minded you are, Master, to hold a grudge after we came here to back you up."

Far from being repentant, Cleare seemed to be enjoying herself. "You said it! The real bad guy here is our master for giving them reason to doubt. If we hadn't come to take your side, you'd still be in hot water. And yet you have the audacity to tell us we'll pay for it? Talk about misdirected anger."

That's all you have to say for yourselves, you little traitors?

"Cut the crap," I snapped. "Angie and Livia would never have doubted me if you two had done your jobs and helped me out to begin with."

"From a completely objective standpoint, your actions have been questionable enough that it's not unreasonable for someone to suspect you of two-timing," Luxion said.

Angie nodded. "Exactly. Hearing you stole a bride from her wedding made it hard not to doubt you."

"You've got it all wrong. I didn't *steal* her. I *saved* her from an unhappy union," I explained.

It must have sounded like an excuse, because Angie scowled like she wanted to say something else. But perhaps she felt guilty about unfairly accusing me, because her words lacked their usual confidence. "I sympathize with you on the Noelle thing. That's why I won't blame you for

saving her. But that said, what do you intend to do now? Have you even thought about the future?"
I scratched my cheek. I hadn't put much consideration into it. It wasn't really something for me to decide. "That's up to Noelle."
Angie frowned. "If all this talk about the Sacred Tree Priestess is correct, then we should absolutely take her home with us."
The Sacred Tree was an energy resource for its people, one that didn't cause environmental waste—free, clean energy, I guess you could say. And I had a sapling from that very tree growing in my possession. Conveniently, it had already chosen its Priestess. If we took Noelle and the sapling back home with us, we could plant it and completely secure Holfort Kingdom's energy needs now and into the future. Given Angie's position, it was no surprise she was eager for me to do just that.
"H-hold on a moment!" Livia interrupted, her hesitation clear. "What about what Miss Noelle wants? She hasn't made up her mind yet, has she? She's still waffling, right?" She wanted to respect Noelle's choice, whatever it was.
The girls' opinions were in direct opposition.
"I feel bad for Noelle, I do," Angie said, trying to reason with Livia. "But this could resolve our energy crisis. At this point, the decision goes beyond an individual issue. Yes, I'm sure that means Noelle's life will be somewhat suffocating, and she'll have fewer freedoms, but she's also an incredible asset to the future of our country. I'm sorry, but I don't want to give her a choice in this."
I understood why Angie was so insistent. Holfort would be all the happier if it didn't have to worry about importing energy. However, Livia simply couldn't get on board with that. No matter how much Angie cited the benefits of the maneuver, her emotions wouldn't let her compromise.
"We can't do that," Livia insisted. "Miss Noelle won't be happy. She should be able to choose whether she continues living here or comes to Holfort, right? Forcing her to come would be wrong."
"Perhaps I worded myself poorly. I agree that we should honor her wishes as best we can. If she desires a life of luxury, by all means we should give it to her."
Livia shook her head. "No, that isn't what I mean. Luxury isn't the issue! Angie, what's wrong with you? You're not acting like yourself. The Angie I know would never agree to sacrifice Miss Noelle."
Their argument gradually became more heated. Angie's emotions were starting to get to her too.
"If we can save countless people in the future by sacrificing a single person in the present, then I think we're obligated to prioritize the masses over the individual," said Angie. "I'm not saying we should make Noelle *suffer*."
Indeed, she had suggested abiding by Noelle's wishes within reason. But that wasn't good enough for Livia.
"Miss Noelle isn't a *tool*!"

She felt like Angie was treating Noelle like an object, and when she pointed that out, Angie was left flustered. Even she was aware of what she was doing.
“I admit to thinking of her as an asset,” Angie said. “But this deal is almost too good to be true. If Leon weren’t the one telling me about it—if he weren’t directly involved—I would still be skeptical. However, knowing that it’s legitimate, I think we must do whatever it takes to bring Noelle back to the kingdom. Leon, back me up here.” Angie shot an expectant look at me.
Livia grabbed my arm, her eyes tearful as she gazed up at me.
Oh no. Don’t look at me with those eyes!
“Mr. Leon, please stop her. We can’t do something like this. Are you so eager to prioritize your own happiness that you would treat Miss Noelle like an object?”
“Uh, um…” My eyes darted back and forth nervously.
Angie grabbed my other hand. “Leon, you are an earl of Holfort. It’s your duty to protect the people. I realize you don’t want to shoulder all that responsibility, but you can’t run from this situation.”
Livia was focused on the individual while Angie was focused on the group. Livia wanted Noelle to be happy, while Angie was willing to sacrifice Noelle so *others* could be happy.
Wait. Does this mean I have to choose? I have the final say on something this important?!
As I began to inwardly panic, Luxion jumped to my rescue.
“Master, if you were to take her as your third wife, that would solve your problems.”
You stupid AI. You really love pouring fuel on the fire, don’t you?! I rounded on him. “You know, that’s something I hate about you. You always ignore people’s feelings.”
“Oh? You’re the last person I want to hear that from, given how you’ve ignored Noelle’s feelings this entire time. If you were to accept her as your partner, she *would* be happy. Holfort Kingdom would also be happy, since that would give them access to the Sacred Tree. In this way, happiness would abound for everyone.”
How do you call that everyone? Where does my happiness factor in, huh?! I scowled. “You keep saying it would solve everything if I accepted her feelings, but things aren’t that—uh, what? Angie, what’s wrong?”
Angie suddenly dropped her gaze as if she were deep in thought. Slowly, she lifted her chin and stared me straight in the eyes. “Luxion’s proposal isn’t such a bad idea. I agree. Accept her feelings.”
Livia immediately shook her head. “Angie, why would you say that? Especially after you told me how much you wouldn’t be able to forgive Mr. Leon if he two-timed.” She stared at Angie in disbelief, but the latter averted her gaze.
“The value of this deal supersedes my personal feelings. I don’t even mind if you push me aside, Leon. You *must* take Noelle as your partner.”

I couldn’t take it anymore, seeing the way she mumbled, as if she was trying to convince herself this was the right course of action.
I bolted. “I-I can’t!”
“Leon?”
“Absolutely not! I refuse to break up with you, Angie!” I shouted at the top of my lungs as I dashed out of the room.
Livia’s voice echoed behind me. “Mr. Leon?!”

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“I can hardly believe you fled and left the girls. You really are the lowest of the low, aren’t you?”
After escaping the house, I was headed to Marie’s estate with Luxion floating beside me, needling me about my life and my choices.
“Oh, shut it already. I haven’t forgotten how you backstabbed me, you know. I should have known better. AIs are dangerous; they always betray humanity.”
“I would never betray humanity. Well, new humanity might be an exception.”
You literally just contradicted yourself! If they’re an exception, you’re basically admitting you’d turn on humanity in a heartbeat if you could!
“You filthy traitor,” I hissed.
“If you are truly concerned with Noelle’s well-being, you should keep her at your side,” Luxion said, unfazed by my animosity.
“And what does that have to do with how you did me dirty?”
I never, *ever* wanted to experience Livia and Angie suspecting me of cheating again. And besides, Luxion’s actions this time had been way too suspicious. All joking aside, what if he really did plan to turn on me?
“Let’s be serious here for a second,” I said. “Luxion, why did you set up that whole situation? And why’d you go out of your way to draw Cleare into your scheming?”
“You realized all of that? That’s quite perceptive for you, Master.”
He made these types of snide remarks practically every day. I overlooked them this time in favor of sticking with the topic of conversation.
“Stop trying to distract from the issue,” I warned.
“Unfortunately, no peaceful future awaits Noelle. With that in mind, the best course of action would be to honor her wishes in a way that benefits us.”
I snorted. “‘Us,’ you say?”
“If you take her as your partner, the kingdom would get its hands on a Sacred Tree. As of right now, the sapling doesn’t possess the same level of power as the Sacred Tree in the republic, but in the future, it could resolve Holfort’s energy crisis. That would be an enormous boon.”
“Future problems are something for the future generations to worry about, not us. Tell me what this is really about.”

“You want the truth, hm?” Luxion paused. “Noelle never had any freedom to begin with. Once word of her value gets out, the kingdom will be far from the only foreign power vying to get their hands on her. If you don’t keep her at your side, you won’t be able to protect her.”
Luxion rattled off all kinds of explanations, but every single one of them sounded fake.
“That’s not what this is *really* about, is it?” I pressed.
“You still doubt me? In that case, allow me to be completely frank with you. If another country were to get their hands on Noelle, they would do whatever it took to keep her and secure the sapling. That might genuinely result in something you would regret. She would be lucky if it only meant an unwanted marriage. In the worst-case scenario, they might destroy her mind and treat her as an object.”
He had a point. Any country would love to get their hands on the Priestess and the sapling. I understood that well enough, but would they really go as far as Luxion claimed?
“Are you saying the Alzer Republic wouldn’t be able to protect her? She’s their Priestess.”
“Oh? After all they have put you through, you still trust the republic?”
Since coming here, the Six Great Houses had given me endless grief. Pierre had used his prestigious position to do whatever he wanted. Loic had used his authority to kidnap Noelle and force her into marriage. Luxion wasn’t exaggerating; they had put me through a lot. I had managed to take them down every time by sheer force, but once I was gone, there was no telling what they would do.
“I can’t believe being chosen as Priestess means she’ll never be able to be happy, even though the game had a proper happy ending.”
I couldn’t stop myself from grousing. In the game, Noelle had lived a happy life even after being chosen as Priestess. She got to marry the man she loved and rebuild her broken house. But what about the current Noelle? She had nothing, and she wasn’t any kind of happy.
“Luxion, where did it all go wrong?”
“Are you asking why she doesn’t feel as she did in the original story?”
“This is all our—no, it’s *my* fault…isn’t it?”
It was entirely possible that Noelle would never have ended up this miserable if I hadn’t come to the Alzer Republic to study abroad. The thought weighed on me.
“As usual, you are being far too self-conscious,” said Luxion. “Do you really think your existence has that kind of far-reaching effect on the world? Don’t tell me you think the world revolves around you.”
I glared. “Do you hate my guts or something? Your words are like daggers, you know. Do you really not feel anything after chucking dozens of them at my heart? You do realize I’m supposed to be your master, right?”
“Your heart is practically made of steel. I am not worried,” he assured me.
“No, I have a glass heart! A delicate glass heart! Show some consideration!”

“You should reexamine the definition of ‘delicate’ in the dictionary. You seem to think it means something very different.”
Ugh, this jerk really pisses me off. He’s got a filthy mouth, and he’s a backstabber. Otome game AIs are literally the worst!
While we bickered, we finally arrived at Marie’s estate. Commotion was already breaking out at the front entrance.
“What’s going on?”
I peeked in through a window to find Marie cradling her head in her hands. Jilk was standing nearby with a conflicted expression. Luxion listened in for me and relayed the shocking contents of their conversation.
“It appears that Jilk was involved in scamming people. Based on their conversation, it seems to have happened when Marie chased the boys out of the house.”
“He did what?!” I cried. The revelation was so shocking that I couldn’t help but react.
The moment Marie heard me at the entrance, she came darting out. “Big Brooooother!” She sobbed as she flew forward. I managed to catch her in my arms, but she knocked the wind right out of me.
“Oof!”
She had basically taken me down in a tackle, which left me clutching my stomach as I fell to my knees. That didn’t bother Marie; she still clung to me, crying as she explained what was going on.
Dummy, apologize first!
“Jilk, he… He…!”
“Yeah? What did that treacherous buffoon do?” I asked, finally managing to pull myself back to my feet as Jilk came over to us.
“Miss Marie, please listen to me!” he begged.
In an instant, Marie’s face transformed into that of a demon. “You want me to listen to you? Do you even know what you’ve done?! Who told you that you could leech off others to make a profit, huh?!”
I continued massaging the newly formed bruise on my stomach as I listened. This scamming seemed to have occurred when Jilk was running his antique business.
“That’s not what happened! I-I really did intend for it to be a legitimate business at first. The problem was that no one would buy any of the items I picked out. All they cared about was looks! That’s why I figured I would prepare items that would actually please them. And when I did, they sold like crazy.”
“You slimy jerk!” Marie roared, launching herself at him. She grabbed him by the collar and shook him. “That’s called a *scam*!”
Is it just me or does Jilk almost look happy getting turned into a human bobblehead? I hope it’s just my imagination.
More importantly, he really had done, you know, crime.
“You know, I used to think you were an absolute piece of crap beyond repair, but you’re even worse than I gave you credit for,” I said.

Luxion shared my sentiments. “This is the same man who tried to plant an explosive on your Armor when you dueled him. I believe that among all the boys, he is the greatest piece of ‘human garbage,’ as you call it.”
All five of Marie’s boys were trash, frankly, but at least the other four were comically so. I couldn’t even find the humor in Jilk’s more atrocious behavior.
Marie finally released her hold on Jilk, her breathing erratic. She crumpled to the ground, both hands planted on the floor to keep her from toppling over as she broke into tears and wailed, “How many people will I have to kowtow to before this life is over?!” Her voice echoed all around us.
At the sight of the tears pouring down her cheeks, even I had to feel some sympathy.
“Why does she always seem to reel in the worst guys imaginable?” I asked Luxion.
“I think it’s less an issue of her reeling in unscrupulous men and more that she has a habit of turning men into the worst versions of themselves. Then again, the idiot brigade were hopeless to begin with, so perhaps it’s a bit of both.”
I grimaced. “You really don’t show any mercy, do you?”
“Is that what you think?”
A flurry of footsteps echoed as the other inhabitants of the house rushed into the foyer. Julius was the first to appear, wearing an apron and a towel twisted into a sweatband around his forehead.
“Marie? What happened?” Julius asked as he scooped her into his arms. He was the kingdom’s prince (and former crown prince, if we’re being technical), but his attire was completely at odds with his royal status. That was probably why, even as she continued crying, Marie couldn’t help bursting into laughter.
Brad was the next to appear, cradling a dove and rabbit in his arms as he rushed out. “What’s going on? Huh? Why is Bartfort here? Oh, I get it. You grew lonely without us, I presume.”
“Like hell I did.” I didn’t miss a beat before dismissing this narcissist’s nonsense.
Chris was the next one to dart out, clad in a loincloth with a deck brush in his hands. “I heard Marie yelling. Did something happen? Hm? Bartfort, what are you doing here?”
Explaining at this point would have been a pain.
Anyway, Chris certainly has become more…unique as of late.
Chris seemed to be enjoying his new look despite the, uh, exposure, and that only made me more eager to ask him if he was sure his clothing (or lack thereof, in this case) was such a good idea.
Greg joined us next, his upper half entirely naked. “I heard—oh, Bartfort. What’re you doing here?”
Every single one of them had asked the same question. But that wasn’t important. Instead, I summed up the real situation.

“Jilk’s been swindling folks. Marie found out, and now she’s pretty irked, as you can see.”
The four men turned their gazes from Marie, who was still laughing and crying, and focused instead on Jilk, who had collapsed on the ground, his head swaying back and forth.
Julius’s eyes filled with disdain. “You’re the one who went on and on about wanting to compete with me, and yet you dared to con people in the process?”
The other three were no less disgusted.
Brad glared coldly at Jilk. “No one in their right mind would do something like that. It’s hardly appropriate. No, scratch that, it’s entirely *in*appropriate.”
An eerie light reflected off of Chris’s glasses. “I always suspected you would go to whatever underhanded lengths required to succeed, but now I see how right I was.”
Greg’s muscles bulged, indicating he had probably been in the middle of a workout when this commotion broke out. “You’re too delicate,” he insisted. “You’ve got that warped personality ’cause you don’t work out enough.”
That has absolutely nothing to do with this.
Julius passed Marie to me. “Bartfort, please look after her.”
“Huh? Why? What are you going to do?”
“Jilk is my foster brother. We were raised as family. It falls to me and my fists to put him back in line!”
The four boys left together, dragging Jilk behind them.
Only moments later, Marie finally returned to her senses.
“Huh?! Where did Jilk go?”
“Julius and company took him with them. I assume they plan to deliver a lecture,” I said.
Marie’s shoulders slumped, and she covered her face with both hands. “Why did he have to *scam* people? I’d rather he be the penniless bum he was before.”
“You really do have it rough.”
Marie had hoped for a reverse harem ending, and she had successfully ensnared five promising young men. Why, then, did she seem so…unhappy?

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After preparing a gift, we visited one of the merchant houses where Jilk had sold art. Their estate was enormous, indicating they ran a huge company as well. Being able to sell a fake to someone this impressive proved that Jilk had been born with an undeniable (if not unscrupulous) talent.
Marie’s entire body trembled like a leaf. “T-t-today truly is an a-auspicious d-day.”

We'd come to apologize, but Marie was so nervous that she was proving useless. I'd only tagged along because I had no other choice—and I mean that seriously. I wouldn't have come otherwise.
"We apologize for the sudden nature of our visit," I said to the head of the house, stepping in for Marie.
"Not at all. I suspected you would eventually come."
Had the man already realized Jilk had sold him a fake? I wondered as much, but the tall, slender man almost seemed as on edge as Marie.
"Uh, you see," I started to explain.
"I already know what you want to say."
"You do?"
He turned and gave instructions to a butler. Said butler immediately carried over an item that I could only assume he'd had prepared beforehand, anticipating our visit.
That must be the thing Jilk sold him.
Curiously, the butler was handling it with utmost delicacy. He even wore gloves as he set the teacup on a nearby table. If I didn't already know it was a fraud, I'd suspect he was handling high-quality porcelain. Shocking as that was, it had nothing on the direction this conversation was about to take.
"Is this the item Jilk sold you?" I asked.
"It is." He eyed the teacup sadly. The other servants in the room all glanced at us nervously.
Something weird is going on. This guy was swindled, but he isn't pissed at all.
Perhaps he hadn't yet realized Jilk's deception.
Marie hesitated, waffling, but she wasn't quite the scumbag that Jilk was, so she finally opened her mouth to spill the beans. "Uh, um…!"
"I know!" said the man. "You came to take this item back, didn't you? It only makes sense, given its quality. I never dreamed I would be able to obtain such a piece for as little as that young man sold it for."
"R-right… Wait, what?"
The man's reaction made no sense.
"Uh, actually, we weren't planning on taking it back," I said. "It's just that we heard our acquaintance was selling antiques and it seemed so outlandish, we came here to ask about it for ourselves."
"Wh-what?! Truly?" All the tension disappeared from his face.
"I'm not exactly well versed on works of art. Is that teacup that high-quality of an item?" I asked, glancing at it.
The man's eyes flew open. "Of course it is! Knowledge of the techniques for producing such a porcelain cup died out over five-hundred years ago! I already own a few pieces myself, but I've never seen one in such perfect condition. It was considered one of the greatest masterpieces of its period. You can count the number of intact porcelain pieces like this on one hand. That's how few there are! I asked some other enthusiasts with more

knowledge to take a look at it, but it only kicked up a huge fuss as they started demanding that I sell it to them!" He was grinning from ear to ear as he bragged about his collection.
I put a smile on my face and nodded. "Oh, how interesting."
Marie glanced at me anxiously.
I lowered my voice and asked Luxion, "Is it the real deal?"
"It is."
His answer left me utterly baffled. What was going on here? But I did my best not to let my confusion show on my face.
"Ah ha ha! I'm shocked that he's actually running a legitimate antique business," I said. "By the way, you wouldn't happen to know anyone else he made deals with, would you?"
Is this just a coincidence?
While I asked about other clients, I also pressed the man for more of his thoughts on Jilk.
"Master Jilk is quite the connoisseur for his age. No, that's an understatement. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he was blessed with a knack for coming into contact with genuine works of art. He's a genius!"
Wait, he's lavishing praise on Jilk, the guy with absolutely no sense whatsoever? Well, maybe the man was right. Maybe Jilk did have some kind of talent.
The merchant had his beloved cup stowed away before turning back to smile at me. "When I saw an earl from Holfort Kingdom appear at my door, I was genuinely worried what this could all be about."
"Earl?" I tilted my head. "Oh, me?"
"Yes. There are all sorts of rumors floating about, and some of them are none too flattering. I thought you had come to take my teacup from me, so I admit I panicked inwardly."
There was nothing inward about it. Your panic was pretty obvious.
More importantly, what were these rumors?
"I'd love to know what kind of gossip you've heard," I said.
"Oh, I wouldn't dare repeat any of it. That said, you really are a well-behaved gentleman despite your youth."
Me? A gentleman? True, I did aspire to be the kind of man my master was, but I was fully aware of my immaturity. Yet this man claimed I was acting like a gentleman?
Probably just fluffing my feathers. I was happy to receive the compliment regardless. "You're a real flatterer."
"Not at all. It's the truth." His expression was sincere. "I envy the kingdom."
We didn't speak any more after that, but his words lingered in my mind. They seemed to insinuate something troubling about the nobility in the Alzer Republic.

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We continued our investigation after that, but apologizing proved to be entirely unnecessary. Each person had more or less the same thing to say.
“Master Jilk is a genius! No, he must be beloved by the god of art!”
“He’s like the savior of art, with his ability to shuffle through a veritable mountain of trash and pick out the genuine treasures hidden within!”
“If Master Jilk had been born in the republic, I would have gladly given him my financial patronage. Oh, how I envy the kingdom.”
Could you believe it? Jilk was the only person who thought he’d swindled anyone. By the time we returned to Marie’s estate, I was the one cradling my head in my hands.
“What the heck is going on here? Every single one of them praised Jilk, saying he had an unprecedented aesthetic sense,” Marie grumbled. She was in a daze, relieved to learn that Jilk hadn’t deceived dozens of people.
“So, what? This means that moron actually has an eye for this kinda stuff?” I massaged my temples.
While we grappled with this new revelation, Jilk waltzed over, covered in bruises from his beating. In spite of how painful his wounds seemed, he was grinning triumphantly.
“Oh my, what’s this? Do I spy Earl Bartfort, the man with no aesthetic sense whatsoever?”
“You really are a slimy bastard,” I snapped at him.
“I speak only the truth. Honestly, you were all too hasty, jumping to conclusions. All I did was search for items I thought would interest people and sell them at appropriate prices. If you want to call that a crime, then I don’t know what to tell you.”
He talked big, but in reality, he’d only sold pieces that he didn’t think were actual works of art. It just so happened that the buyers were all pleased with their purchases. Luxion had confirmed each case, and every single one of them was legit. It was hard to chalk that up entirely to coincidence.
Jilk sneaked several glances at me. “What’s this? You’re not going to apologize to me?”
“I’m not the one who beat you silly. Talk to your buddies. You should be grateful I ever forgave you for planting that explosive on my suit.”
“Very well. I suppose I can drop the matter.” He shook his head, still not entirely pleased with my unwillingness to oblige him.
Ugh, you really piss me off, you conniving jerk.
Marie’s face suddenly lit up with a realization. “Wait a second. That means if Jilk tries to pick out things other people want, he can sniff out legitimate antiques?” Her eyes began to sparkle.
Jilk pulled a face. “Uh, Miss Marie? Just so we’re clear, I have always been able to discern real pieces from fakes. It’s simply that this time, I decided to prepare works that suited people who lack the same appreciation for art that I possess.”

Marie waved her hand dismissively. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say. Jilk, why didn’t you do this sooner?!”
“Well, uh…”
“If you sell legitimate works, that’s not a *scam*. If we rely upon your keen eye, we can make enough money to live comfortably from now on!”
True, assuming they did so successfully, they could make a killing. Jilk had brought in some impressive profits in the short time he’d run his business. And while he wore a conflicted expression, he wasn’t refusing her request. In fact, after a pause, he finally said, “A-all right then. I’ll pick out something I think would suit you, Miss Marie.”
“I can’t wait, Jilk!”
“I won’t let you down. You shall soon see that I am made of better stuff than the other four.” He didn’t hesitate to use the opportunity to build himself up.
Yep, I knew it. He’s got a terrible personality.

Chapter 2:
Serge

BY THE TIME Lelia returned home, it was already almost the middle of winter break. She was living with her fiancé, Emile, and he was worried sick since she had been gone for so long.

“Lelia, what’s this about you adventuring in a dungeon?!” Emile demanded.

Annoyed, Lelia coldly replied, “I told you I would be going to a dungeon during break.”

“But you never told me how serious a venture it would be!” Emile had apparently misunderstood the scale of the operation. Now that he knew how dangerous her adventure had been, he wanted answers. “Why did you do something so risky? You’re living a comfortable life now. You don’t need the money, right?”

“I already told you. I had a good reason for going.”

Lelia wouldn’t tell him the specifics, so naturally, Emile couldn’t accept her actions. While they bickered, Ideal suddenly appeared out of nowhere and floated beside Lelia.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Emile. My name is Ideal. I serve Miss Lelia, as her spaceshi—oh, pardon me. I mean, her airship.”

Emile gawked at the robot. “A-airship? With that tiny body?”

“Oh, no. My real body is elsewhere. I was fortunate enough to be able to venture outside thanks to Miss Lelia when she came to find me with her companion, Mr. Serge. Ahh, truly, I am so grateful to them.”

“Huh? You were with Serge?”

Lelia snatched the floating ball from the air, trying to stop him before he could blabber any further. “Y-you! What are you doing out here?!”

“I simply thought I could rectify the misunderstanding if I explained the situation personally.”

“I-Idiot!” Lelia snapped. “I told you not to show yourself!”

“Pardon? I believe you specifically said I should ‘hide myself for a bit,’ the ‘bit’ being the key part here.”

As Lelia reflected on her mistake and made a mental note to give him more specific directions next time, she turned her gaze to Emile. She hesitated, unsure of how to explain things, which only made his expression turn more severe.

“Lelia, I want answers! Why were you with Serge?!” he shouted.

Lelia was shocked. Emile was always so deferential that she’d never expected he would get angry.

“S-so what? What’s wrong with that, huh? I needed him to get through this dungeon, so I had him help me. That’s all.”

“You never told me you’d be alone with another man! You realize we are engaged, yes?”

These words made her once more recall how she'd turned down Serge's offer during their trip, choosing instead to be with Emile. That only made her more irritated with Emile for doubting her.
You're seriously going to suspect me of two-timing when I specifically said no to Serge? Lelia's voice rose even louder than Emile's as she shouted, "Nothing happened between us! And more importantly, do you plan on interrogating me every time I do anything? Stop getting so jealous just because I have a guy friend!"
"Of course I'm going to get jealous. Of all people, you really had to go with *Serge*? Do you think I don't know how he feels about you?"
Lelia's eyes narrowed, and her voice dropped low. "What? So you don't trust me?"
Emile's shoulders trembled. "N-no. That's not what I mean." He could never handle pushback.
Lelia had thought Emile would give up the first time she deflected, but he was being more stubborn than usual. She chalked it up to coincidence and gave it no more thought.
"Anyway," she said, "this conversation is over. End of discussion. Got it?"
"R-right."
With that out of the way, she turned her attention back to Ideal. "As for you! Don't you dare show yourself in front of people again without my permission!"
"My deepest apologies. I didn't give it proper thought. I assure you, it won't happen again."
Lelia couldn't keep scolding him after that, not when he seemed so repentant. After all, her instructions hadn't been entirely clear. There was no point continuing the conversation.
"I'm going to my room now," Lelia announced before marching off, leaving Emile and Ideal behind.

***

Not long after Serge returned to the Rault estate, Albergue summoned him to his study. As the house head stood in front of his wayward adoptive son, he looked utterly exasperated.
"You could at least send word when you return."
Serge plopped down on the couch and stared up at the ceiling as he waved his hand dismissively. "Yeah, yeah. I know."
"No, it's precisely because you *don't* know that I am reminding you like this. It appears you returned to the republic a while ago. Where have you been in the meantime?"
"Eh, you know. Here and there."
Albergue frowned at his uncooperative son. After his biological heir, Leon Sara Rault, passed away, he had adopted Serge so the boy could eventually

inherit the house name. Alas, Serge was obsessed with traveling and exploring and hadn't even bothered to attend the academy of late.
"Serge, I want you to cut down on your adventures from now on."
"What?!"
"I agreed you could go during your long school breaks, but you ignored my conditions and set off on your own. Did you really think I would approve of your actions?" From Albergue's perspective, it was a reasonable demand. Serge, however, didn't see it the same way. "And when have you ever approved of *me* as a person?"
"We're going to do this again, are we? I have already accepted you as my son. Now you need to be a little bit more—"
Serge scoffed, "I'm only a substitute for *him*, right?"
"No one ever said that."
"Yeah, right."
By "him," Serge was referring to Albergue's biological son, Leon. Ever since Serge's adoption, he'd hated being compared to Leon.
This will make it difficult to introduce him to the other Leon, Albergue thought. But I'll have to tell Serge about him eventually.
This Leon he thought of was the young man from Holfort Kingdom, the one who so resembled his own son and who had caused an endless stream of controversy during his stay in the republic. Keeping him a secret from Serge simply wasn't an option.
"Serge, the New Year's Festival is almost upon us. I want you to take part in it," said Albergue.
"New Year's Festival? That's just a stupid old party, right? I'm not a kid anymore. There's no point in me going."
"This time will be different," Albergue assured him. "You absolutely must attend. There is someone I want to introduce you to."
"Who?"
If Albergue answered honestly, Serge would no doubt skip, so Albergue opted to keep it a secret for now. "It will be a surprise."
"Tch." Serge clicked his tongue and stood up, marching out of the study. Albergue watched on forlornly.

***

Since Angie and Livia had decided to stay for the time being, we all had to return to Marie's estate. Why, you ask? Because, according to Cordelia, "This house is far too small for a woman of Lady Angelica's standing!" Angie was too preoccupied with other things to worry about her living quarters, so she stayed silent on the matter.
As I sat in the dining hall, I let out a sigh. "Why is this happening?"
Julius, who was sitting beside me, elbowed me. "Hey, Bartfort."
"What is it?"

“Don’t you ‘what is it’ me! Do you really intend to do nothing about this predicament?” he snapped quietly, keeping his voice to a whisper. The other four bozos were also glaring at me, unable to withstand the tense atmosphere that had flooded through the house.
Their eyes all said the same thing: *Do something!*
I turned my gaze to where Angie and Livia sat. They were utterly silent. Since the disagreement over Noelle, they hadn’t spoken a word to each other. They still seemed concerned enough about one another that they stole glances occasionally, as if they both wanted to speak. Having a traditional Alzerian meal on the table, there was probably much they wanted to discuss about it, but they hadn’t resolved their differences. That left the air awkward, full of unspoken words that nevertheless desperately wanted saying.
Miss Cordelia stood behind me, coughing purposefully as if to draw my attention. “Lord Leon, why don’t you explain what it is we are eating to your fiancées? This cuisine is most unfamiliar to them.”
“What? Me? I don’t know squat.”
Groans erupted throughout the room.
Noelle, ever the considerate one, piped up. “Well, um…this is Alzerian soup. The most important component is the shellfish broth…” She had spoken up because she couldn’t stand the pervasive silence, but in spite of that, her explanation was rather short.
“Thank you for going to the trouble to tell us,” Angie said quietly.
“N-not at all.”
And that was the end of all conversation. Things had been in this uncomfortable state for a while now. Our dinner table was normally a lively one, but today, it was silent save for the clink of cutlery.
Oh boy. How am I going to fix this?

***

Once the meal was over, I turned to Marie for advice, with Luxion in tow.
“I wanna do something to mend fences between Angie and Livia. And I want you two to help me,” I said.
“It’s refreshing to see how honest you are about your intentions to have others fix your mistakes, Master.”
I glared at Luxion. “And whose fault do you think this is to begin with, huh?!”
“Your fiancées suspecting you of infidelity is completely unrelated to their current argument. I would kindly ask you not to blame everything on me. It’s most displeasing.”
“You little—”
Fine, so it wasn’t Luxion’s fault, but the whole stress from my hypothetical cheating fiasco had only added fuel to the fire of their own disagreement. Even if Luxion wasn’t entirely to blame, he had some culpability.

As we glared at each other, Marie simply shook her head. The expression on her face seemed to say, *Neither of you get it.*
“Their little tiff doesn’t matter,” she said. “The real issue is Noelle. What do you plan on doing about her? She’s really worried about her future.”
Do you really hate Angie and Livia that much?
“What do you mean by ‘doesn’t matter,’ huh?” I sneered. “From where I’m standing, this is a huge issue. I’m as worried about them as I am about the issue with Noelle.”
Marie scowled and stepped away, putting distance between us. “Do you seriously mean that? Those two are basically having a playground spat. Shouldn’t you be more concerned about Noelle? There’s a limit to how oblivious you can be before it becomes an actual crime, you know.”
“I’m not oblivious,” I insisted.
Marie’s jaw dropped, as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Luxion shook his eye back and forth, exasperated. “We are well beyond oblivious at this point.”
They were both being ridiculously mean.
“Wh-what’s with you two?!”
“Forget it,” Marie said with a sigh. “More importantly, Noelle is seriously hung up on this. You should get in there and say something. Don’t you feel bad for her?”
“Is it really my place to say anything to her? This is her issue. Besides, Noelle is…” *The protagonist of the second game,* was what I wanted to say, but the words hung unspoken.
Still, with that in mind, didn’t she deserve to have a future in which she could be happy? I hesitated over whether I had any right to meddle.
Luxion and Marie glanced at one another, both wearing looks of disgust as if they could barely stand me.
“After everything that’s happened, you’re really going to worry over the game’s original script?” asked Marie. “Are you stupid?”
“Oh, pardon me, did you not realize already? Master was born stupid,” Luxion replied.
These two really don’t show any mercy, do they?
“I’m telling you, you’re both overthinking this! A-anyway, in regards to the Noelle situation, I’d rather leave it to her to decide instead of risking making things worse by sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong.”
“This whole thing would be resolved if you’d just tell her to come with you back to the kingdom.”
I shook my head at my sister’s entirely irresponsible remark. “This is Noelle’s life. I have no right to make decisions for her.”
“You really are a jerk.”
Me, a jerk? Not at all. If I took Noelle back with me, all that awaited her was life as Priestess of the Sacred Tree. It would be the same thing if she stayed here, but that was exactly why, at the very least, I wanted to respect her wishes.

“Now,” I said, “let’s get back to the original topic of this discussion. What should I do about Angie and Livia?”
“I already told you, that little whatever is nothing. They’ll resolve it on their own soon enough. You should be more concerned about *Noelle*! Ugh, men really are morons!”
“Indeed, my master does worry about the insignificant while putting off truly important matters. He’s so utterly hopeless that it gives me even more reason to look after him. I couldn’t be more pleased.”
As usual, Luxion was both snide and sarcastic. I had to wonder if he thought he was the real master in this relationship.
Marie dropped her gaze to the floor. “Do you really mean to leave the decision to Noelle? You know, if you’d only say as much to her, I know she would—”
I could already guess what she was going to say, but I still hesitated. If I told Noelle to come to Holfort, I knew she likely would. But would that actually make her *happy*?
“Don’t expect that from me,” I said, cutting her off.
“But—” Marie started to say, clearly intending to argue the point.
A knock on the door interrupted her. Cordelia’s voice filtered through the crack underneath it. “Lord Leon, you have a guest to see you.”

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“Hey there! Have things been well since I saw you last?”
My guest was none other than Louise Sara Rault. She was the villainess in the second game of the series, as well as the daughter of the final boss, Albergue Sara Rault. In the game, she spent most of her time bullying the protagonist, but personally, I thought of her more as a doting and affectionate older sister. She’d even asked me to call her “Big Sis” the first time we met. That would have been a terrifying request under ordinary circumstances, but since my actual sister was such a scumbag, Miss Louise was a welcome change, especially given how kind she was to me. I would have jumped at the chance to have her as my sibling, given the option.
Seriously, why can’t she be my real sister?
It made me think of Jenna, living back at our parents’ home in Holfort Kingdom. Calling her awful was putting it lightly. No one could blame me for bemoaning the desire when I returned home and was last forced to see her face.
Louise had soft, fluffy, golden-blonde hair that fell to her shoulders, and her purple eyes were filled with kindness. She was a year ahead of me at the academy, and she really did act like an older sister. I once again lamented our lack of blood relation, though I managed to force a smile for her.
“Well, despite being stabbed in the back and interrogated by my fiancées for something I didn’t do, I’m just peachy,” I said.

At a loss for how to respond, Miss Louise managed a small smile in return, looking pleased. “If you’re able to joke about it, that suggests you’re doing just fine. We’ll save the details for later, much as it piques my curiosity. Today, I actually came to extend an invitation.”
“To what?”
“The New Year’s Festival hosted by the Six Great Houses.”
“New Year’s Festival?” I echoed. “Ahh, I think I know what that is…”
Marie had mentioned something before. It was one of the events from the second game, which triggered during the protagonist’s—Noelle’s—second year at the academy. If things had gone according to the script, one of the love interests would invite Noelle and the pair would officially declare their romantic relationship at the party, or something like that.
“Oh, you already know about it?” Miss Louise asked, surprised. “Once a year, we pledge our undying loyalty to the Sacred Tree. Or at least that was its original purpose. Nowadays it’s more like an actual festival.”
“In what way?”
“The Sacred Tree has formed something of a cave within its roots, and a monument was erected there. The younger generation like myself go to it to renew our pledge to the tree.”
Luxion, floating beside me, piped up. “You mean to say it’s not a rigid ritual so much as an event for the young people to enjoy? And you are inviting Master to participate in this?”
“Exactly. It’s fairly austere at the beginning, but after the formalities are out of the way, it’s more like a party.”
I was impressed to hear they had such a shindig.
Miss Louise suddenly brought her face closer to mine. “I would like you to attend as my partner.”
“Oh, cool, as your partner. Wait…what?” I nodded along until my mind registered the words, at which point a chill ran down my spine.
Footsteps echoed outside the room, and when the door swung open, Miss Cordelia was standing on the threshold. She stepped away a moment later, allowing Angie to enter.
“You seem to be have an intriguing conversation,” said Angie. “Leon, why not let me join you?”
Despite being on bad terms with Angie right now, Livia followed on her heels. “Mr. Leon, I heard a beautiful woman was visiting you. You really are popular, aren’t you?”
They were both smiling, but either they suspected me of two-timing again… or they’d simply come to sniff out the connection I shared with Miss Louise.
I glared at Miss Cordelia, but she didn’t spare me a glance.
Are you my enemy now? Is that it?
“Girls, you’ve got it all wrong,” I insisted. “Th-this woman is—” I hesitated, unsure of how best to introduce her.
Miss Louise pressed her hands together, grinning from ear to ear. Her eyes seemed to light up as she stepped toward the girls, giving each one a

handshake. “Are you Miss Angelica? And this girl must be Miss Olivia, then, I presume?”
“Y-yes,” Angie stammered. “That’s right, but…”
“Uh, um…” Livia similarly stumbled.
They were both at a loss for how to deal with Miss Louise’s warm reception. The latter didn’t seem to mind, seeming genuinely overjoyed by their presence.
“I was shocked to hear Leon had *two* fiancées, but seeing how adorable you both are, I can’t help but envy him, even as a woman. Leon is a lucky man. Oh, I’m Louise, by the way. Louise Sara Rault. I hope the three of us can get along.”
Angie’s initial confusion turned to exasperation, but that soon abated as well, her expression softening. “You’re Duke Rault’s daughter, yes? You sure seem to be on good terms with Leon.”
“Yes, I am fortunate for his friendship—and that’s all we are, by the way. Nothing romantic between us.”
Livia’s face visibly relaxed. “I’m sorry for doubting you.”
“Oh, nothing to worry about. I assume he’s done something to warrant your mistrust?” Louise shot me a look, a teasing smile tugging at her lips. “You have two cute girls from Holfort already. You shouldn’t be messing around, you know.”
“Y-yeah, I’m reflecting on my mistakes,” I muttered.
Miss Louise turned her attention back to the girls. “I apologize for the abruptness of the request, but I would like Leon to accompany me for a bit for this event. I promise not to cause you ladies any trouble.”
Angie tilted her head. “Why Leon?”
I had wondered the same thing.
“I made a promise with my younger brother a long time ago,” said Miss Louise.

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After Miss Louise left, Livia flagged me down. “Mr. Leon!”
“Y-yeah?!” I jumped in surprise.
Tears welled in Livia’s eyes. “Please grant Miss Louise’s wish! I beg you!”
“S-sure.”
She was on the verge of sobbing because when Miss Louise explained her request, she had told us that I looked exactly like her younger brother. However, Leon Sara Rault had passed away over a decade ago. We apparently had a similar aura though, which was why Miss Louise had taken such a liking to me and fussed at every opportunity.
“I want her to be able to keep the promise she made to him,” Livia continued. “So please help her do that.”
“If I’m good enough to be a stand-in, then I’ll do it,” I said.

Ultimately, that's all I was—a proxy for someone who wasn't here anymore. If I was being entirely honest, it was a heavy burden to take the place of someone I didn't even know. I had agreed to do it, but there were more important matters on my mind.
"That aside, are you and Angie going to make up soon?" I asked.
Livia's shoulders jumped. Her cheeks colored as she awkwardly averted her gaze and stared down at the floor. "I-I want to apologize, I really do. And I want us to mend things, but…I can't agree with how she wants to deal with Miss Noelle. What about you? What do you think about all of this?"
"Me? I think Noelle should decide."
Air filled her cheeks as she pouted. "You're being a meanie."
"How do you figure?"
"I get that you're trying to be considerate of Angie and me, and I appreciate that. But I don't want to see Miss Noelle's happiness suffer because of it. Besides, I do understand where Angie is coming from."
"Livia?" I stared at her in surprise.
"I get that Miss Noelle's different from me—that she's special." She was still staring at her feet, not meeting my gaze.
Part of me wished I could reassure her that she was way more special (character-wise, anyway), but that wouldn't really solve anything in this situation. So I settled for something close instead.
"Well, you're plenty special in my book."
Livia lifted her chin. Her entire face flushed, all the way to her ears. She opened and closed her mouth repeatedly, trying to find words to respond. She finally put a hand to her chest and took a deep breath, her eyes growing misty as she stared at me. "You've become a real smooth talker since coming to the republic. You're not saying that kind of line to other girls, are you?"
"What? Do you really have so little faith in me?" I laughed, trying to play it off, but she grabbed me by the arm.
"Angie is at a loss. Please talk to her. I'm positive she's just waiting for you to say something." Livia's clouded expression made clear that she was just as lost as Angie, but she still insisted that I prioritize my other fiancée.
You two really do love each other.

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When I visited Angie's room, I found her sitting on her bed. I told her about my conversation with Livia, and she collapsed onto her side. It was almost frustrating to see her leave herself wide open and defenseless even though I was right in the room with her.
"I see," she mumbled. "So that's what Livia said, huh?"
"Why not mend fences?"
Angie shot upright. Her skirt shifted and let me get a glimpse of what was underneath it—but that's information strictly for yours truly, thanks.

“Excuse you! I want to make up with her as quickly as possible too, you know! B-but it’s just… I don’t know how to put it. All I thought about were the benefits we’d reap, which was why I tried to push Noelle on you. I didn’t even consider her as an individual. That’s an undeniable fact.”
“Not a soul out there doesn’t want to get their hands on the Sacred Tree to benefit from it.”
Anyone who saw a mountain of gold coins in front of them would be eager to pocket it for themselves.
Okay, logically speaking, seeing millions of dollars just lying there on the street would actually be kinda terrifying.
Since I was a greedy coward, however, I had no license to find fault with Angie for what she’d said.
“Besides,” I continued, “you recognize it would be in the best interest of the majority, right? You say you didn’t consider Noelle as an individual, but you *were* trying to help the people of the kingdom, right?”
Livia and Angie were always thinking of other people. It was something I could never do.
“You’re being too generous with me,” Angie said. “Yes, I did think about Holfort and our people, but what I sought most of all was personal gain.”
“Personal gain? Like, you want to increase the Redgraves’ power or something?”
If Holfort did get its hands on the Sacred Tree, it would bring with it an enormous level of influence. It held too much power itself not to cause an impact. From a nobleman’s standpoint, it only made sense for Angie to prioritize what would benefit her own house. I didn’t share the same views though, personally.
Angie shook her head. “No. You were my primary concern. The more power you hold in the future, the happier I thought you would be. But you wouldn’t desire that power at the cost of Noelle’s happiness, would you? I only realized that after the fact.”
So her primary thought was how it would benefit me?
“You were worried about my happiness?”
“I was blinded by greed,” she said. “Forgive me.”
“Uh, there’s not really anything to forgive. But in that case, all the more reason you and Livia should make u—”
“Th-that’s a completely separate matter! H-how…do you think I should go about apologizing to her?” Angie had seemed cool and composed a moment ago, but the moment Livia entered the conversation again, she turned into a cute but insecure little girl.
“I dunno. The normal way?” I said with a laugh.
Angie jumped to her feet to lightly beat her fists against my chest.
“D-don’t you laugh at me! I’m seriously worried about how to handle this!”

“You’ll be fine,” I assured her. “Once the two of you go out sightseeing… Actually, scratch that. You might get wrapped up in trouble if I leave you to your own devices. That settles it! I’ll show you around the republic.”
“Y-you really mean that?”
“It’s a promise.”
Angie finally stopped hitting my chest, instead wrapping her arms around me. “I expect you to be a proper guide then. I had completely blanked it out, but I was really looking forward to sightseeing this time. Also… Ah!” She froze, suddenly remembering something. Her cheeks colored. “Leon, I’m sorry. So much happened that I forgot to tell you…”
“Huh?”

Chapter 3:
Siblings

THE LEADERS of the Six Great Houses had gathered. Most wore sour expressions, while Albergue's was one of pure exhaustion.

The kingdom certainly has sent some meddlesome individuals.

After the recent series of incidents, Alzer now had to pay reparations, and Holfort had sent people to negotiate the process. The New Year's Festival was soon approaching, however, so the leaders wanted to put the matter to rest, especially as the coming festival carried a very different meaning than the ones before.

Loic, former heir to House Barielle, had inadvertently brought matters in the republic to a grinding halt in the wake of his scandalous affairs. Other foreign powers probably thought the republic was in the midst of a crisis. In order to dispel those impressions, they planned to make this New Year's Festival even more extravagant than ever.

Their most important job before the event was negotiating with Holfort Kingdom. Alas, the person the kingdom had sent was most unpleasant and tiresome, leaving everyone looking absolutely exhausted.

Lambert of House Feivel was the first to open his mouth. He was a short, pudgy man with a balding head and a miserable personality. It was no surprise, then, that he made no effort to hide his resentment. "This is utterly humiliating! The Alzer Republic has never lost a war, yet a third-rate country like Holfort Kingdom has us dancing around in the palm of its hand. This is unprecedented!"

Everyone else was fed up as well. Under normal circumstances, they would probably have readily agreed with Lambert, but reality wasn't so kind.

Bellange, the leader of House Barielle, sneered at his peer. "You choose *now* to express your dissatisfaction after being so tight-lipped a moment ago? Why not speak your mind when we're actually in negotiations?" Bellange smiled mockingly.

"And whose fault do you think it is that we're in this position to begin with?" Lambert shot back. "Oh, while we're on the subject, how is your former heir doing after he was abandoned by the Priestess? Is he in good health, hm?"

"Bastard!" Bellange roared, launching himself from his chair.

"Enough, both of you," Albergue's low voice cut through the air. "We'll adjourn the meeting here."

Albergue tried to speed out of the meeting room, but he stopped when several of his subordinates came rushing to the door, begging to be allowed in. As soon as Albergue gave his permission, his breathless aides managed to eke out, "B-big trouble! The Sacred Tree is… It's…!"

***

The town was pitch-black, save for the illumination of streetlights. My breath came out in visible white puffs, which served as a reminder of just how cold Alzerian winters were.
“If it snows, we may even get a white Christmas,” I said.
Angie drew her brows. “A white…what?” She and Livia were walking on either side of me. Both wore coats, their cheeks rosy red.
“Mr. Leon, you say some odd things from time to time,” Livia said.
That’s right. This world doesn’t have Christmas—though they do have a similar holiday.
Livia stared up at the sky. “The Alzer Republic really is a mysterious country, isn’t it? When I first saw that enormous Sacred Tree, I thought it was a mountain.”
“It is pretty big, isn’t it?” I gazed up at it as well, amazed by the size. How many decades, or even centuries, had to pass for it to grow to that height?
Angie glanced around at our surroundings. “I see they’ve developed ground transportation instead of relying on airships. I suppose since they have unlimited access to energy, this is more convenient. That way they don’t have to worry about their vehicles crashing.”
Airships weren’t so bad themselves, but when they crashed, the resulting damage and casualties were astronomical.
Angie’s eyes lit up when she spotted a tram. “I want a vehicle like that one. Though I suppose trying to supplement the fuel costs through magic stones would make it difficult. It might be possible if we hiked up ticket prices, but then how many people would actually use it…?” She trailed off as she contemplated.
“You came up with all that off the top of your head just by looking at a tram? You’re amazing, Angie,” I said, genuinely impressed.
“Perhaps it would be more accurate to say you’re an anomaly for having such an empty head,” Luxion butted in, ever fond of disparaging me. “You see how technologically advanced these other countries are and you don’t feel the least bit uneasy. It saddens me.”
I glared at him. “What good would it do me to rack my brain over it? I’ll leave fretting about technological advances and whatnot to the higher-ups. Although now that I think about it, Roland’s pretty crap when it comes to getting his work done, so maybe he’s not thinking about it either.”
I didn’t feel the least bit guilty about addressing Holfort’s king by his first name rather than by his title, but Angie glanced at me and put her hand on her forehead.
“It’s hard to believe you’re even allowed to take that kind of attitude with His Majesty. You have some nerve.”
“What? This is Roland we’re talking about. I could even call him ‘rat bastard’ and no one would bat an eye.”

“Sometimes I can’t decide whether you are extremely bold or simply an idiot. I know you always come through in a pinch, but don’t you think you’re a little too relaxed most of the time?”
“I like him the way he is,” Livia chimed in. “He’s a bit awkward, but he’s kind. It’s cute, don’t you think?”
C-cute? Me?!
Before I even had a chance to respond, Luxion beat me to the punch.
“Olivia, shall I have a thorough medical evaluation performed for you? I believe it is highly likely you have a serious problem with your brain.”
You little twerp… Do you really find it that odd for her to call me cute?!
“Uh, um… Th-there’s nothing wrong with me,” Livia stuttered.
“I believe there is. Your ability to find Master ‘cute’ is proof of a serious abnormality. I believe Angelica may suffer from the same affliction.”
“You think I’m abnormal?” Angie asked.
“Yes. You called Master ‘bold,’ but he is at all times extremely indecisive and, in fact, tends to waffle the most when the stakes are the highest. Furthermore, he’s completely incompetent.”
I just got utterly ripped apart by an AI. What did I do to deserve this?
“H-hey, you jerk! You’re really gonna say that? You’re always like this! I get that you hate me, but don’t use that as an excuse to spread misinformation!”
“Misinformation?” Luxion echoed. “I fail to see the issue here. I am merely stating facts. Oh, my apologies. That must be what bothers you so much—that these things *are* facts.”
“You know what? I’ll remember this. I’m the kinda guy who always pays back twice as good as he gets.”
That didn’t discourage Luxion from mocking me further. The two of us continued bickering until Angie and Livia started laughing.
“Wh-what?” I demanded.
Angie tried desperately to hold back her laughter. “Apologies. I just felt so relieved to see you two acting the same as always. You haven’t changed at all since you left Holfort.”
Livia glanced between Luxion and me, a smile on her face. “Yes, you two are as close as ever. Even here in the republic, you’re still the same Mr. Leon I knew back home.”
I narrowed my eyes at them. “You know, it sounds an awful lot like you girls are saying I haven’t matured at all.”
“That is precisely what they’re saying,” Luxion said matter-of-factly. “Or did you somehow misunderstand the obvious implication?”
“I think you and I need to have a conversation about what a master-servant relationship entails. Don’t think we won’t when we get back home,” I said, stabbing a finger in his direction.
Frankly, Luxion was being even more sassy than usual. Had I done something to offend him?
Luxion turned his gaze to the very top of the Sacred Tree.

“Just gonna ignore me?” I snapped. “Enough of your—”
“Master. If I may, I have a question,” said Luxion.
“What is it?”
“There is a flower blooming at the top of the Sacred Tree. I have heard nothing about such a phenomenon. Do you know anything of it?”
I followed his gaze, but I couldn’t make it out from here. Luxion finally projected a video that revealed what he was seeing. Angie peeked over my shoulder, staring at the white flower apparently in bloom atop the tree.
“It has a ton of petals,” I observed. “It looks like a chrysanthemum.”
“The shape is similar, but the size is completely different,” said Luxion.
Angie stared at the projection and pressed her hand over her mouth. “So the Sacred Tree has blossoms as well? Although the positioning looks rather unnatural.”
Livia also studied the image. “It does. It almost looks like someone put it there, and something about it feels artificial. Also it’s…off-putting. I get a bad feeling from it.”
What could this mean? What’s gonna happen?

***

When we returned to Marie’s estate, the atmosphere was the same as always. We barely made it through the front door before Marie peeked her head out. As soon as she realized I wasn’t holding anything in my hands, her face fell. She must have been expecting gifts.
A sweet and spicy scent wafted out from the kitchen, which was becoming pretty commonplace by this point. When Julius popped into the foyer, Angie’s expression soured.
“You’re back already? You should have said something. I’ll have some skewers ready momentarily, just give me a few,” he said.
It seemed Julius was in charge of dinner tonight. Ever since he returned after Marie chased him out of the house, he’d periodically taken over dinner duty. That was wonderful, truly it was… Except for the fact that the only thing he knew how to make was skewers.
Julius casually strode back toward the kitchen to prepare our food. In his wake, Angie covered her face with both hands.
“Don’t let it get to you, please,” said Livia, trying to console her.
“Livia, I have no regrets about His Highness abandoning me. I mean that. But seeing him like this leaves me at a loss for words.”
Who would ever imagine their country’s prince would be captivated by skewers and dedicate his life to becoming a cook? No one, that’s who. Even I couldn’t have seen this coming.
Miss Cordelia was the next person to appear, and she quickly took our coats. “Welcome home. Will you be having dinner here?”
Angie sighed. We’d eaten out for lunch, but sensing impending trouble, we had opted not to stop at a restaurant for dinner.

“I will,” said Angie. “His Highness is making our meal personally, correct?”
“My lady, if you would prefer, I could prepare something else for you,” Miss Cordelia offered.
“That would be impolite. I need to get changed though, so Livia and I will return to our rooms for a bit.”
“Very well.”
Livia gave a small wave before climbing the stairs to her room. In their absence, I headed for the dining hall, where Marie and the others were already feasting.
“Not having to do all the cooking myself is heaven!” Marie had a skewer in either hand, her cheeks swollen from all the food she’d packed inside her mouth. She also had a glass of alcohol nearby.
It looked less like they were having dinner and more like they were having a drinking party, with the skewers as a side snack rather than a meal.
Carla, Marie’s close friend and lackey, smiled merrily. “Not to mention Prince Julius even takes care of the cleanup afterward!”
Kyle, Marie’s half-elf servant, wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, because it pisses him off when any of us try to touch his utensils. Not that I really care at all, but are you sure it’s a good idea to let the prince cook like this?”
Marie continued snacking on her skewers as she took a drink, impressively downing all the contents of her glass in one gulp. “Pwah! Nothing to worry about. It’s fine! Julius is only doing it ’cause he wants to. Plus, who knows what’ll happen when we go back home?”
Once winter break was over, we would be in our third term, and after that, we’d have to return to Holfort. Julius could indulge his passion for grilling here in the republic, but it might be a different story once we were back home. As such, Marie wanted to let him do as he wanted for now.
Noelle made her way over to me once she realized I was back. “Leon, did you eat out today?”
“Nope. I’m getting ready to chow down here.”
“Then how about we eat togeth—oh, sorry.” Noelle stopped herself as soon as she remembered Livia and Angie. She left my side and returned to her own seat, where she resumed her meal. She was probably trying to be considerate.
The atmosphere in the room turned awkward, but it didn’t last for long as the idiot brigade began making a ruckus.
“Hey, listen to this. I’ve noticed that at times, Julius looks at Rose and Mary strangely. He helps me feed them, but then he starts saying weird things like, ‘Hurry up and grow. I can’t wait for you to get bigger.’ Doesn’t that strike you as odd?” Brad was referring to his pigeon and rabbit respectively.
I was less surprised about Julius’s interactions with them than the names Brad had picked.
“That’s what you call those pets of yours?” Jilk asked with an exasperated sigh.
Brad grinned proudly. “Adorable, aren’t they?”

“Well, being friends with a pigeon and a bunny does seem to suit you.”
“Yes, I *do* have adorable friends!”
Jilk’s sarcasm flew right over Brad’s head. Meanwhile, Greg and Chris were bickering.
“Greg, you’re only eating the chicken breast and tenderloins. Stop that. And while we’re on the topic, stop hogging all the salted meat. Why not try something slathered in sauce for a change?”
“Not interested in anything other than breasts and tenderloins. Also, if I’m gonna eat anything, it’s gotta have salt on it. The rest is yours.”
Greg was chowing down like a man possessed. Though in this case, a picky one who refused to eat anything else. On the other hand, while Chris sounded like the reasonable one, his appearance suggested otherwise; he was clad only in a loincloth and happi coat. Lately, that was all he ever wore.
Isn’t he cold?
Marie glanced at me and cocked her head. “Not going to sit?”
These guys had given me hell last year. Why, then, did I find myself studying abroad with them? *I* was the one who wanted to cock my head and demand answers.
A shattering sound suddenly broke through the clamor in the room. I raced toward the source, which was in the kitchen, only to find Yumeria collapsed on the ground.
“Hey! Are you okay?” I asked as I dashed over to her.
Tears welled in her eyes. “I-I’m so sorry. I was only trying to help.”
By the looks of it, Miss Yumeria had tripped and dropped some plates. She quickly tried to reach for the broken shards, but Julius interrupted her.
“You’ll only hurt yourself. I’ll get a broom and dustpan so we can clean properly.”
Since Julius had worked part-time in a food stall for a while, he was so accustomed to these kinds of accidents that they didn’t faze him. I was impressed.
“I can’t believe our useless prince has grown up so much.”
I had always thought he was nothing more than a spoiled brat, so I was happy to see him mature.
Once the moment passed, I looked Miss Yumeria over to make sure she wasn’t hurt.
“Looks like you didn’t injure yourself at least.”
“I’m sorry,” she said again. “All I do is make mistakes.” She was even ridiculously cute when she was depressed.
“Nah, nothing to worry about,” I assured her.
Kyle stepped into the kitchen and approached us. Although Yumeria looked too young to be a parent, she was actually his mother, though that didn’t mean much considering he was the more well put-together between them.
“You broke plates again? How many does that make now?” he demanded.
“Kyle, I-I’m so sorry.”

“You should be apologizing to my mistress, not me. She seems to be in a good mood right now, so it’s not a big deal, but these plates aren’t cheap.”
As he continued admonishing her, I cut in, “That’s enough. Kyle, you can get back to your food.”
“No, I’ll help with the cleanup. Besides, servants like me shouldn’t be dining with everyone else to begin with. We only did that before because we had no other choice with how tight things were, but I think it would be best to draw a line from now on.”
You little twerp, you’re way too serious. You should let your mom pamper you a little more.
Kyle was lucky he had that chance. All I’d done for the mother in my previous life was cause her endless grief ’til the very end.
“Kyle, I really am sorry,” said Miss Yumeria again.
“I already told you to apologize to my mistress, not me,” he snapped. “Or at least apologize to the earl.”
Flustered, Yumeria turned to me and bowed her head low. “M-my humblest apologies!”
“No, I already told you, it’s fine.” I glared at Kyle. “Hey, Kyle! You could stand to be a little nicer—”
“She’s older than me. She needs to get ahold of herself,” Kyle muttered under his breath as he left the kitchen, looking somewhat sad as he went.

***

At around this time, the other members of House Rault learned of the abnormality occurring with the Sacred Tree. Albergue consequently summoned both Louise and Serge to his office. Louise stood with her arms crossed, refusing to even look in Serge’s direction. Meanwhile, Serge’s hands were shoved in his pockets, and he averted his eyes away from Louise.
Albergue stood before his two children, already exhausted by their unchanging attitudes. But it would do him no good to chide them now, given the circumstances.
“A flower has bloomed on the Sacred Tree,” he said. “I checked every record up until the present day, but nothing was said about such a phenomenon, at least not for the past three hundred years.”
Serge grinned. “That’s great. Means we gotta be pretty lucky to be able to see it then.”
His thoughtless response infuriated Louise. “Not using your brain at all, I see,” she scoffed. “Maybe you should take some time to study up and learn what your status actually entails, hm?”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
They finally turned toward each other only to glower.

“Enough,” Albergue snapped. “We’ll be keeping a close eye on the tree for now, and we’ll be holding the New Year’s Festival as planned. You both are required to attend.”
Serge raked a hand through his hair before stomping toward the door. “That festival’s just for kids. Don’t see any reason why I gotta go.”
“Serge!” Albergue shouted, but it was too late; Serge was gone.
Louise stared down at the floor, clenching her teeth.
Albergue turned his attention to her. “Please allow him some leeway, Louise. Serge is—”
“Why do *I* have to be so considerate?! Leon wanted so badly to be a part of the New Year’s Festival, but he never got to. Yet Serge has the audacity to say it’s ‘just for kids’? I won’t be allowing him so much as an inch of leeway.”
Louise was referring to the time when Leon was five years old. His body had grown weak, and the doctor informed the family that he wouldn’t make it to the new year. At that time, he said he wanted to participate regardless, but that wish remained unfulfilled. This was why Louise had gone to the other Leon to ask him to participate as a stand-in for her brother. She hoped granting her brother his wish was a way in which she could make things up to him.
Albergue understood Louise’s intentions, which was why he had allowed her to invite Leon despite the trouble it would inevitably cause. He also knew that if the new Leon and Serge ran into each other, the latter would become extremely upset.
“I understand why you feel such contempt for Serge,” said Albergue. “But from the moment we adopted him, he became a part of our family.”
Louise lifted her chin, eyes brimming with hatred. “I will *never* recognize him as family.” As she turned on her heel and started out of the room, Albergue stretched a hand after her, but he stopped himself from saying anything.

***

After retreating to her room, Louise retrieved a small photograph she had stashed in the drawer of her desk. It was a black-and-white picture of her little brother. A long time ago, art and photos of him had been scattered about the estate. Now there wasn’t a single one to be found. This was all because of Serge.
Albergue had wanted a successor, so he’d adopted Serge. After Serge came into the family, he had thrown out almost every single memento of Leon. He had even burned an item Louise had kept as a dearly treasured keepsake in her dead brother’s memory. This was the reason she hated Serge so much.
“Why is he ‘part of our family’? He’s not! You agree with me, don’t you, Leon?” Louise asked the picture as she recalled Serge’s arrival at the Rault estate.

***

Three years after Louise's little brother passed away, the liveliness that had once gladdened the halls was utterly gone. Her noisy little brother's absence had left the place an empty husk of its former self.

The Raults' extended family and servants were kicking up a royal fuss at the lack of an heir. They had begun discussing the immediate need for a replacement, hence why Serge was brought to their castle. His birth parents were thrilled that he would be the next head of the great house to which they were related, but he hid behind them the whole time, staring down at his feet.

I guess maybe he didn't want to come here, Louise thought.

There was nothing to be done about it, but she did feel sorry for him. When the opportunity arose for her to talk to him in private, she said, "Starting today, I'll be your older sister. I hope we can get along, Serge." She held a hand out to him, though she was unable to hear whatever he was muttering under his breath. "What is it?" she asked.

"…up."

"Huh?"

"I-I said shut up! Who'd ever want to get along with you?!" he yelled at her before charging out of the room.

Leon had been a mischievous child, but he had also been very straightforward. Louise had expected similar behavior from Serge, so this came as a shock. Had she done something to offend him?

Louise spent the next several days worried over the confrontation. She tried again to say they should get along, but Serge refused to meet her gaze.

Then, a few months after his arrival…

"No! Nooo! Serge, stop! I'm begging you! That was a gift from Leon!"

Louise suddenly returned home to find Serge burning a collection of Leon's photos and portraits, as well as other mementos. She launched herself at him, clinging to his arms in an attempt to stop him, but Serge managed to shake her off. Then he tossed a gift she had received from Leon into the flames as well. Louise tried to jump in after it, but some servants scrambled to the scene and managed to stop her.

"Stop! Please, give it back!" Louise sobbed as she stretched her hands toward the fire, but alas, Leon's gift to her had been a ring made from paper. It was an ugly thing, and clumsily made. It was the only belonging she still possessed that had been hers and Leon's, and theirs alone. In seconds, it was gone without a trace.

The servants, who understood nothing about the situation, were dumbstruck.

Louise had in fact told Serge about the ring. She had brought it out of her room, and when he showed interest, she shared the story of its creation. Now he watched silently as it disintegrated into nothing.

Tears poured down Louise's face. She whipped around and howled, "I *hate* you! I'll never, *ever* forgive you for this!"
Up until that point, Serge had never properly looked Louise in the face, but for the first time, he met her eyes and stared.

***

At some point, Louise fell asleep and in the process recalled unpleasant memories from her youth. She slowly propped herself up in bed, noticing she hadn't even bothered changing before she drifted off.
"What an awful dream."
Her parents had scolded Serge for his actions that day, but as if trying to be considerate of his feelings, they proceeded to take down and confiscate any remaining photos or portraits of Leon. If they didn't, Serge flew into a destructive rampage and burned whatever he saw.
When had it all started? When had Serge begun to loathe her little brother so ferociously?
Normally, a family would rescind an adoption for such behavior, but after entering their family, Serge had received one of the Six Great Houses' crests. That couldn't be removed easily, and too much else was wrapped up in his adoption for them to back out. They had to consider their own retainers, their extended family, and the current state of affairs in the republic… An entire laundry list of reasons for why Serge had remained the new heir.
Louise stared down at her brother's photo. Her voice was warm with affection as she said, "Leon, the New Year's Festival is almost upon us."

***

"Dammit!"
Serge was livid when he returned to his room. He slammed his foot into his chair and sent it tumbling to the ground. Then he threw himself onto his bed, belly up, and stared at the ceiling.
"New Year's Festival? What crap. That's just an excuse for those stupid romantics to offer their prayers or whatever."
It had originally been a ceremony for the nobility to offer their gratitude and prayers to the Sacred Tree. Although, calling it a ceremony was a bit of a stretch; it had been a simpler affair in the beginning. People gathered on New Year's to drink alcohol together and that was it. But that had been centuries ago. It had gradually become more and more formal, turning it into the obnoxious affair it was today. Now it really could be considered a ceremony, though there wasn't much meaning behind it. Yeah, people prayed and swore their oaths, but it devolved into a party soon afterward. Young people would enter the cave in pairs to pledge their lives and loyalties to the monument within. People only went in as family or as

couples, which meant there was no purpose in Serge participating. Yet an image of Lelia entered his mind.

“No, hold on a sec. If she’s engaged to Emile, that means she’ll be coming too, right?” As soon as he realized that, he changed his mind. “Can’t believe I come back and she’s engaged. What does she even see in that guy?”

Serge knew he had feelings for Lelia. More than anything, he found her profoundly easy to just be around; she wasn’t ridiculously polite like the other noble girls, and she even had a bit of a dirty mouth at times, which he preferred in a woman. On top of that, she accepted his dream to become an adventurer.

As a member of one of the Six Great Houses, it was hard to spend any time casually with most girls. It was for that very reason that, to Serge, Lelia was precious. Irreplaceable.

Admittedly, he also liked her because she seemed to loathe her older sister, just like he did. Lelia would never say as much, but the way she gazed at Noelle reminded Serge of himself. There was such a complex mix of emotions in her gaze—both love and hate. Realizing that had made him realize how alike they were. It was how he’d initially developed an interest in her, and in the blink of an eye, those had turned into romantic feelings. Yet Lelia was utterly different from the first woman he’d fallen in love with, so he’d been shocked when he realized his affection for her.

As Serge reminisced, his expression clouded over. “My first love might not have gone well, but this time, I’ve got no plans of apologizing for what I’m gonna do.”

Though he felt guilty about Emile, Serge in no way intended to give up on Lelia.

Chapter 4:
Our Promise That Day

ONE DAY over a decade ago, Louise was once more at her little brother's side, as she was every moment even as he grew weaker and weaker. On that day, she happened to notice he was staring out the window.
"Leon, aren't you cold?"
"I'm fine. Hey, Big Sis—" Leon suddenly broke into a fit of coughs, and she reached for his hand, squeezing it in hers.
Even the doctor couldn't figure out why he was wasting away. Normally, the Sacred Tree's divine protection—the very crest on his hand—would have prevented it. Their crests could combat all manner of sickness. Yet it did nothing for Leon.
"Leon, stay strong," Louise coached as the seal on her hand lit up. She was trying to heal him, but it had no effect.
Leon smiled at her nonetheless. "Thanks, Big Sis. I feel a little better now."
Even as a child, Louise could see straight through her little brother's kind white lie. "Y-you'll get better," she promised. "I swear you will. The Sacred Tree will protect you. Father and Mother are both doing their utmost to find a way to heal you too."
They had gathered countless doctors and even bought secret remedies from abroad. Alas, no matter what they tried, Leon's condition didn't improve.
Louise's hand tightened around his. "What do you want to do when you get better?" she asked.
"Mmm… Oh, I know! The New Year's Festival!" he managed to choke out in between coughs.
"The New Year's Festival?"
"Remember? Last time I couldn't go because it was 'too dangerous.'"
The previous year, they hadn't participated because they were both still too young.
"Th-then do you want to go into the cave with me?" Louise asked.
"What? No way."
She scowled. "Wh-why not, huh?!"
"Because I've got a fiancée now. So I'm going to go with her. I know we haven't met yet, but she's my number one. It'd be inconsiderate to go with you instead of her," Leon said with a chuckle.
Tears streamed down Louise's cheeks. "Leon, you jerk!"
"D-don't cry. F-fine… I'll go in with you too. No one will mind if I enter twice, right?"
"Leon, you two-timer!" she blurted back, using a word she'd only recently learned.

Since Louise was still crying, Leon reached out and stroked her back, trying to console her. “Sorry. I promise I’ll go with you to the festival. And we’ll go into the cave together too.”
“That’s a promise, okay? If you break it, I’ll never forgive you.”
“Okay.” Leon smiled weakly, which only left her heart in greater pain.

***

The end of the year came quickly and with it, the New Year’s Festival.
“This is totally not what I pictured,” I said.
“And what, precisely, *were* you picturing, Master?” Luxion asked.
“I dunno. They said ‘New Year’s Festival,’ so I was thinking something like the shrine visits we do on the first day of the New Year in Japan.”
I had left the house anticipating what I was used to back home only to find that a carnival had rolled into the event venue. The adults were all dressed up and busy meeting with each other while the children raced around. They were all smiles as they enjoyed the attractions or watched street performers. It was exactly like the carnivals in foreign dramas. Meanwhile, I had envisioned a Japanese shrine complete with lines of food stalls, which couldn’t have been further off the mark.
“Please try to be careful, Master.”
“What? You think I’m going to act like a hyper little kid and get lost in the crowd or something?” I shot back, assuming his little warning was more of his usual sarcasm. Then I noticed his gaze was fixed on something. I followed the direction of his lens to find Lelia clad in a coat with a dress and high heels underneath.
As much as I was distracted by the ostentatiousness of her clothes, something more curious nearby drew my gaze. A blue-colored Luxion floated beside her.
“Hey, what’s going on?” I demanded. “She’s got a fake copy of you.”
“I am unsure. Granted, I can reasonably speculate; you and Marie both called this the second installment of an otome game. In that case, it wouldn’t be odd for there to be something similar to me in the world. Personally, I am shocked to encounter a fellow AI in this day and age.”
Is he not counting his meeting with Cleare?
The blue-Luxion soon noticed us and alerted Lelia, who made her way over. She flipped her side ponytail over her shoulder as she strutted forward. The confidence she now exuded was markedly different from her behavior before winter break.
“It’s been a while,” she said.
“Happy New—” I started to say in Japanese, intending to greet her the same way I would have in Japan, but her face immediately flushed.
“Are you teasing me?” she demanded.

“Nope. I gave Marie the same greeting earlier. It brought her to tears, I’ll have you know. Pretty sweet we can still use traditional greetings like that even after we’ve reincarnated. Brings back memories.”

Of course, Marie then immediately asked me for New Year’s money, which was also customary in Japan.

As I smiled, Lelia wrinkled her nose and turned to her blue robot. “Ideal, say hello.”

Ideal? That’s this blue thing’s name?

The floating ball approached us—or rather, Luxion. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Please, call me Ideal. My, what a surprise this is. I heard about you, but it’s truly a miracle to be able to meet you in this day and age, Luxion. I hope we’ll be on good terms in the future.”

This AI was being awfully friendly, but Luxion’s reception was ice cold.

“You’re a supply vessel, aren’t you? But you certainly seem on guard. Your ability to avoid detection despite my intelligence assessments is awfully curious.”

“Supply vessel?” I echoed, glancing at Lelia.

She crossed her arms, lifting her chin proudly. “That’s right. Ideal is a supply vessel while yours is a mere migrant vessel, which means my AI is actually a pure military ship. Pretty impressive, don’t you think?”

So it was used by the military to transport supplies, huh?

It probably was impressive, but I had no way to gauge how much so.

“Luxion, is Ideal really that incredible?” I asked.

“He is a military ship that fought against the new humans. If we were to compare the capabilities of our mother ships, then he surely would outmatch me in a number of areas.”

“Then that *is* pretty amazing.”

So the reason Luxion hadn’t noticed this thing’s presence was because of its own special abilities? But Luxion seemed skeptical of that. Was there something more to this situation?

Ideal floated toward me. “So you are Lord Leon, Luxion’s master. I hope we can be friendly with one another.”

“You know about us?” I eyed Lelia, but she refused to meet my gaze.

“Ideal, that’s enough with the pleasantries,” she said.

“Very well.”

Seeing how obediently he responded, I shot Luxion a meaningful look.

“If there is something you wish to say, I do wish you would come out with it instead of staring,” he quipped.

“I was just thinking you ought to take a page from Ideal’s book and show your master a little more respect.”

“I will consider it.”

Was he really that repulsed by the idea of being nice to me? He was awfully stubborn for an AI.

Lelia glanced between us and smirked. “You two really don’t get along at all. He’s obviously not recognized you as his true master.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.
“Because Ideal isn’t the least bit obstinate. He can be a little insensitive sometimes, but he responds to my orders accordingly.”
I glanced at Ideal. He bobbed up and down as if nodding. “It’s thanks to Lelia that I was released from my order to remain on standby. It’s only natural to show her such respect.”
Envious of their relationship, I turned back to Luxion. “See? You should be more grateful to me.”
“Do you realize just how much I have had to clean up after you?” Luxion shot back. “I believe *you* should be more grateful to *me*.”
You… You little jerk. I swear one day you really are going to stab me in the back. I paused. Wait, I guess you’ve already done that, you filthy traitor.
Lelia glanced at the clock before starting away from us. “I’m going to be busy today, so I’ll excuse myself here. Let’s speak again a couple days from now. We have a lot to discuss regarding the future. Come, Ideal.”
“Yes, Lady Lelia.”
Once the two of them were gone, I turned my attention to my AI companion. “Luxion, you got a second?”
The two of them looked like the picture-perfect master and servant, so maybe I was just being cynical, but something felt…off.
“Did you notice it as well?” Luxion asked.
“Oh, so you did too? What a happy coincidence.”

***

After parting ways with Lelia and Ideal, I made my way to the spot where I was supposed to meet up with Miss Louise. I found her waiting there, clad in fancier clothes than normal.
“You look beautiful,” I said. “Makes me wonder if I’m good enough to be your escort.” I was at least wearing a suit, complete with a coat hanging off my shoulders.
Miss Louise looped her arm through mine. “You’re fine. In fact, I’m the one at a loss, being able to attend with Holfort’s renowned hero.”
Hero, hah. It’s not like I wanted to become one.
“I still feel like that should be my line,” I insisted playfully, although something else was actually on my mind. “So, uh, I feel like things are a bit different than what you told me. There’s an awful lot of little kids here.”
Miss Louise had mentioned that she and Leon couldn’t attend because they were too young at the time, yet the place was packed with small children.
“That’s because my father revised the customs to include younger children.”
Albergue did that? Really?
“I’m not the only one who regrets not doing more for Leon when he was alive. At any rate, it’s about to begin, so let’s go over there.”

She pulled me along by the arm, leading me to the most extravagant stage I had ever seen. A number of holy items had been placed there, lending the area a completely different atmosphere. The place was crowded with nobility; all of the leaders from the Six Great Houses had gathered to express their gratitude, pray, and swear their loyalty to the tree. In the middle of all of this stood a conspicuous gate leading into a cave, which Miss Louise pointed at.

“The monument is inside that cave. The two of us will go in there together.”

This cave was a natural hollow created by the Sacred Tree’s roots. It was a curious structure with a real fantasy vibe. It was as if the tree had specifically avoided growing into that space.

“Are you really sure you’re okay with me being your partner?” I asked. “We may look similar, but I’m…” *Not the real Leon.*

I tried to say as much, but Louise clung to my arm. “It would be too cruel of you to try to run now. Or do you feel guilty because of your fiancées? That’s a shame. The only people who can enter together are those who are close. It’s entirely normal for siblings to go together. Of course, there’s also married couples and parents and their children. All kinds of pairs take the journey.”

To be more precise, entering with a lover was a mark of status when you were a teenager. If you didn’t have a romantic partner, this type of gathering was hell on earth. I would definitely have avoided participating at all costs if the circumstances were the least bit different.

“This is an event you really don’t wanna go to if you don’t have a partner, huh?”

After a short pause, Miss Louise agreed. “True enough. Today will be my first time entering the cave.”

“Seriously?”

“I promised Leon. I said we would go in together. So I’ve turned down anyone who invited me until now. I felt like if I went in with someone else, I’d be breaking my promise with him.”

Was she really sure she wanted me to be her partner for her first entry?

The formal ceremony portion of the event ended, and the master of ceremonies announced that it was time to enter the cave and offer our prayers. The whole venue broke out in a clamor. Nearby, a young guy blurted out his feelings to a girl.

“Jessica, I’ve liked you for so long now. Please say you’ll go in there with me. I’ll swear an oath to the Sacred Tree that I’ll spend my future with you.”

He got down on one knee, still grasping her hands in his.

It took some real guts to propose in a crowded place like this. Unfortunately for this poor guy, the world wasn’t so simple that she’d actually say—

“I’m so happy, Jack. I’ve been waiting for you to say that for so long.”

Wait, what? His cheesy lines actually worked?

People began applauding the new couple. Drawn in by the crowd, I gave them a lazy golf clap. The rest of the venue soon followed suit as others proclaimed their love.
“Miss Louise, what’s going on?”
“It’s fairly normal for people to profess their feelings at this time. It’s a popular custom.”
While it seemed charming enough, at least to a foreigner, I failed to understand the appeal. My mind immediately compared what I was seeing to the practices in the kingdom. The girls here were so much nicer. I envied Alzerian men for that. I could still vividly remember a time when I’d told a girl my feelings and she’d said, “Take a look in the mirror and try again.”
“Alzer is such a nice country,” I muttered.
“You think so?”
I considered telling Louise more about the situation in Holfort, but this was supposed to be a celebratory occasion, so it wasn’t the time for that kind of downer.
I glanced toward the cave, where a line had already formed. “Guess we won’t be able to enter for a while.”
“Indeed. Shall we play for a bit in the meantime, then?” Louise tugged me along toward the carnival rides. Despite looking like an adult in that fancy dress, her smile was as innocent as a child’s.

***

Louise navigated the crowds of the carnival, pulling Leon along by the arm. The two almost looked like a cute young couple. Leon remained dumbfounded as a hyper Louise led him by the arm.
“Let’s go over there next,” she said, pointing to a food stall.
Leon’s brows shot up. “A lady like you is willing to eat at a food stall?”
“It’s a special occasion. It’d be a waste not to enjoy it.”
Normally, she never stopped at a food stall, but it was the nature of these events to indulge oneself, at least as far as Louise was concerned.
“Are you not very fond of places like this?” Louise asked.
As I feared, I’ve imposed on him, she thought, worried about Leon’s puzzled expression, which had been on his face for a while now.
Louise felt rather guilty for making him go along with her selfish requests. Leon already had two girls to whom he was betrothed. It hurt Louise’s heart to think her actions might cause them to doubt his fidelity. She had explained the circumstances ahead of time so there would be no confusion, and they all seemed to be on the same page. At the same time, it was one thing to logically understand something and quite another to emotionally accept it. Leon was pretty clueless when it came to that, which only concerned Louise more.

“Oh, no. I’m stunned at how different the atmosphere is here compared to Holfort, but I’m having fun. I’ve got a beautiful woman with me. There’s nothing better than that for a guy, you know?”
“Leon, I think you need to learn a bit more about women’s hearts, or you’re going to get yourself stabbed someday.”
“It’d be great if a girl loved me enough to go that far,” he said with a laugh. He acted as if it were impossible for him, but that made Louise worry all the more.
Perhaps I need to teach him a few things before he goes back home, she thought.
Louise couldn’t help but fuss. He really did so closely resemble her long-lost brother.

***

Lelia was waiting for her turn to enter the cave. People mostly went in the order they had lined up, but newly formed couples who’d just professed their feelings got first dibs. Those from the Six Great Houses were next in priority.
It did seem odd that couples took precedent over the Six Great Houses, but it made sense considering this world was based on an otome game. Dating sims always put romantic events over everything else.
The time for her to enter drew close, but the area was so crowded that Lelia was having trouble locating Emile.
“Ideal, are you able to find Emile?” she asked her robot companion.
“He appears to be preoccupied talking to someone and is unable to make his way over.”
“He’s seriously going to leave his own fiancée hanging? We don’t have much time before our turn is gone!”
The new couples had already finished, so it was time for members of the Six Great Houses to go in. It wouldn’t be long until the next group started.
“The person he is speaking with appears to be important,” Ideal informed her. “Since it seems to be a very serious conversation, I would hate to interrupt him.”
“An AI like you really has that much consideration? Ugh. Fine, whatever.”
Was it someone related to work? Emile was a diligent guy, as Lelia well knew, so she had little choice but to wait.
Just then, a hand shot out of the crowd and grabbed her by the arm.
“Eh?” Lelia squeaked, craning her head. Serge stood there in a suit.
“Serge?!”
He flashed a pearly white smile, but his expression soon sobered. “Lelia, come with me.” He pulled her along without giving her the chance to refuse.
Lelia was dumbstruck at first but quickly said, “W-wait! Hold up a second, would you? Where are we going?!”

Serge was headed straight for the cave.

***

An announcement boomed through the venue. Time was almost up for the nobility from the Six Great Houses, which meant we had to hurry. We'd been having so much fun together that we'd completely spaced it out. It wasn't until we heard the announcement that we started hurrying to the cave.
"M-my apologies, but are we still in time to enter?" Miss Louise asked the person at the entrance.
They hesitated, a bit puzzled, before saying, "You still have time, but—"
"Then we're going in. Excuse us." Miss Louise yanked my hand, pulling me into the cave. A number of lanterns were strung about along the way, making it far brighter inside than I'd anticipated. It reminded me of paper lanterns at festivals back in Japan.
"They sure light it up in here," I said.
"Y-yes, they sure do… Phew. I'm exhausted," Miss Louise huffed, breathless after our sprint. She put a hand to her chest, trying to compose herself. "I would have regretted it for the rest of my life if we failed to make it in time."
"No need to worry. If we hadn't made it, we could have just used our influence to force our way in."
"That's true, but I'm reluctant to do such things…"
Despite being the villainess, Louise seemed opposed to abusing her power. It made me wonder: How could a person like this have been a villainess to begin with? I'd had the same doubts with Angie.
What is up with the villainesses in these games?
"Well, then I could have just come back next year if you needed me to."
Louise paused. "Leon, are you completely unaware of what you're doing? You're on track to become a womanizer if you keep that up."
"No worries. I'm completely faithful to my fiancées."
"One might argue that by virtue of being engaged to two women, you're already unfaithful."
We continued that silly banter as we made our way down the path toward the cave. They had smoothed out the dirt so it was even and easy to traverse. However, tree roots still protruded from the ceiling and walls. I tried to touch one and found it gnarled and damp. Moss grew over the top of the small branches jutting out from it.
Miss Louise pressed her body close to mine. "Honestly, I wanted to come here with Leon when he got better. We promised each other. Yet I didn't get to spend that New Year's with him."
Personally, I thought she was a little too hung up on the kid, but that was her business; I had no right to stick my nose in.
For now, I'm just here to play his substitute.

“At least you’ll be able to keep your promise,” I said.
“But you know, he broke so many of his own. There were a number of others.”
“What, so he made a lot of false promises?”
Miss Louise shook her head. “No, nothing like that.” Her voice rose with anger for a moment, contorting her face slightly, but it soon softened again. “He said that he’d save me when I found myself in a bind. He was supposed to become the Guardian and receive the crest, and he swore he’d be a great one.”
Those were some pretty impressive vows for a kid. I definitely couldn’t spout stuff like that. I was more likely to say something like “Ugh, a Guardian? What a pain.”
Miss Louise pressed her hand over her mouth, muffling her laughter. “Now that I think about it, he was very precocious for his age. He even gave me a ring made of paper…” Her voice trailed off and her smile fell, leaving only sadness in its wake.
“So he professed his feelings for you, huh? Yep, that’s not something I could do.”
“That’s right. You have a sister, don’t you? I believe you said something about her setting a bomb on your Armor or something? I assume you were joking, yes?”
“Nope, that was the truth. She tried to kill me.”
Granted, Jilk—the conniving, malicious bastard—was the one who’d actually made her do it. She was still a terrible sister, though.
“Y-you sure do have a difficult family. Are…you sure you don’t want to join ours?”
I chuckled. “That’s a great idea. I’m tempted to take you up on that. I mean it. For a moment, I actually entertained the notion—but I have my parents and brothers to think about.”
I wasn’t really in a position to ask House Rault to adopt me, and it would probably only cause more trouble for me anyway. If only I hadn’t had other obligations…but alas. My parents were extraordinarily kind, and my brothers had taken good care of me. The only real issue was my dirtbag of an older sister, Jenna. My little sister was a bit off her rocker too.
Wait a second. Doesn’t that mean that, if not for those two, my family would be perfect? Let’s think about this for a sec. In my previous life, Marie also gave me no end of grief. That basically means sisters are like my own personal curse.
“Oh, so you get along well with everyone except your older sister,” Miss Louise observed.
“Actually, I’m not on good terms with my younger sister either. Little sisters are the worst.”
Marie had been a thorn in my side in my last life and was proving to be a pain in the ass in this life too.

***

Serge dragged Lelia along until they reached the inside of the cave.
“Hey, what’s the big idea, making me come here with you?! Emile and I were going to…” Lelia had been meant to enter with Emile, but now Serge had pulled her along without giving her a chance to get away. When he finally released her, Lelia retreated to one of the walls, Ideal floating beside her.
“I cannot approve of what you’re doing,” the robot admonished Serge softly. “You shouldn’t force a woman to come with you to a place like this.”
Lelia knew all about the New Year’s Festival, specifically about how the cave was a place for lovers. Being here with Serge could only spell trouble.
“People saw us come in together! How am I supposed to explain this to Emile?” Lelia demanded.
Serge had been silent, but he finally turned toward her, expression solemn. He placed a hand on the wall, caging her as he leaned forward, bringing the tip of his nose close enough to brush hers. “Lelia, forget about Emile. He abandoned you to talk to other people.”
How does he know about that? she wondered. Lelia narrowed her eyes. “Don’t tell me you—”
“I called in a favor and asked someone to pull Emile away. I told ’em not to force it, though. It was his choice not to leave and come get you.”
Lelia dropped her gaze to her feet. Emile really doesn’t understand women at all. I knew he was serious about work when I picked him, but I never realized he was such a bore.
It made her recall the man she’d been engaged to in her previous life. Unlike with Emile, she’d actually enjoyed that relationship immensely…until it fell apart. That had given her a great deal to reflect on, which was why she’d picked someone as disciplined as Emile this time around. There was something lacking in their relationship, to be sure, but Lelia had no intention of betraying him.
“Serge, enough of this.”
“Why? I love you more than he does.”
“It’s easy enough to say that, but—mrgh?!”
“Oh my, how bold,” Ideal said.
Serge stopped Lelia mid-sentence by slamming his lips against hers. She couldn’t speak, not at all. She tried to fight back, but he was too strong for her to put up much resistance, let alone escape. …Not that she was trying hard to get away.
Several minutes passed with them rooted in place. When Serge finally pulled away, Lelia again dropped her gaze to the floor. Her heart was fluttering; she shared a passion with Serge that she’d never felt with Emile. As her ears turned bright red, he whispered, “I’m serious about you, Lelia. I mean it: I want you. As soon as I found out you and Emile were engaged, I

was at a loss. You have no idea how frustrating it was. It was like my whole world went pitch-black."
Serge spoke so earnestly that it was hard to imagine he was being anything other than serious, and his attitude made clear that he wasn't going to release her until he had an answer.
"Lelia, I want us to be a family together. A real family."
"A family?" she echoed.
Ideal seemed to read the atmosphere and kept silent. He didn't even bother trying to interject.
"Serge, I… I'm sorry. I can't do it."
Crestfallen, Serge's eyes slid half-shut. "All right. Sorry for the trouble."
As the air turned awkward, Ideal faced the entrance of the inner cave. "Oh, that's right; I wasn't supposed to interrupt you. However, it seems the people who came in after us have already caught up."
Indeed, Louise was standing at the entrance. She sped over to Lelia and Serge. "What do you two think you're doing?!" she demanded, likely because she'd seen the kiss.
Serge sneered at her at first, but when he spotted the person who appeared behind her, he gaped.
Noticing something amiss, Lelia said, "Serge?"
Louise stepped toward her. "Lelia, are you here of your own free will?"
"N-no! I mean…" She tried to explain that Serge had dragged her in here, but she was interrupted when he slammed his fist against the wall.
Both girls turned their gazes to him. Serge was trembling with anger, glowering at Louise. "What the hell's going on here, Louise? Who is *he*?!"
Louise retreated a step, and the boy she'd brought with her inserted himself between her and Serge.
"Why hello there. It hasn't been long at all since we last met," Ideal said, faithfully greeting the newcomer.

***

What's with this guy?
I'd finally come face-to-face with the final love interest, but he was acting all strange. The hostility he'd turned on me was off the charts. Was this hatred I was sensing? Loathing? And if so, what for?
Okay, sure, I *had* kind of kicked up a fuss while I was here, but I hadn't done anything to this dude personally. So why did he seem to detest me so much?
Serge's brow was wrinkled as he glared at me, blood trickling down the fist he'd slammed into the wall. He was so overcome with emotion that the pain didn't seem to register.
"Huh? Uh, if I'm not mistaken, this is our first meeting, right?" I said, glancing at the other people in the room to confirm I wasn't crazy.

Lelia looked flabbergasted, but Miss Louise seemed to understand what was going on.
“It is your first meeting, yes. Serge, this is the man Father spoke of. The one he wanted to introduce you to.”
Serge stepped closer. “And who are you?” He acted like he was ready to start throwing punches at the drop of a hat.
Great. I’ve met another pain in the ass.
Were all of the love interests troublemakers or was it just me? I was so desensitized to it by this point that finding Serge itching for a fight didn’t even surprise me. At most, I registered it with an, *Aha, so this is the kinda guy I’m dealing with.*
“Pleasure to meet you. I am Leon Fou Bartfort. I’m originally from Holfort Kingdom, but I’m studying abroad—gah!”
Serge socked me in the face right in the middle of my introduction. I was sent reeling backward and collapsed on my ass.
Miss Louise rushed to my side and helped me back up. “Leon! Serge, do you have any idea what you’ve just done?! This man is a foreign noble. If you so much as injure him—”
I held a hand over my aching nose and glanced up at Serge, who was breathing erratically. Even Lelia seemed stunned at the unprovoked violence.
“Wh-why would you do that? Serge, what’s wrong with you?” Lelia asked.
Serge’s eyes were glued on Miss Louise. “Leon, huh? So what? You found my replacement?”
“I have no idea what conclusions you’re jumping to, but apologize to Leon. I mean it. You cannot even begin to fathom the repercussions for the stunt you just pulled.”
“To hell with that! This guy’s got the same name and same face as your little brother. The fact that you’re here with him can only mean one thing!”
One thing? And what thing is that?
Miss Louise was just trying to fulfill her promise to her younger brother. I opened my mouth to complain, but Luxion swept in.
“Another mess in the making, I see. Master, you sure do love to get into trouble.”
“It’s not like I wanted him to sucker punch me, you know,” I snapped.
“Very well. Shall I dispose of him then?”
As usual, Luxion was going way over the top, and as usual, I tried to put a stop to it, but Ideal beat me to the punch, as it were.
“Oh? You have a rather extreme relationship. But Luxion, I don’t believe that would be a wise choice.”
“He is the one who launched a pre-emptive strike,” said Luxion.
“It’s dangerous to assume you can deal with everything by simply disposing of it.”
Huh. This AI is saner than I would have expected. It actually made me wonder if the two AI that I had come into contact with were defective.

As Miss Louise continued to bicker with Serge, I breathed a sigh. “Anyway, let’s just get this whole prayer thing over with so we can get out of here. And you!” I pointed a finger at Serge. “Once we’re out of here, I’m going to pay you back.”
I always got my revenge, after all. He was going to learn that the hard way.
“Oh yeah? Then why don’t we do this right here and now?” Serge tried to come at me again, but Lelia launched herself forward, clinging to his arm.
“Serge, wait! This guy really is dangerous. I promise I’ll explain later. For now, let’s just go.”
Serge dropped his fists. “Tch. Fine. Let’s go deeper in, Lelia.”
Miss Louise pulled out a handkerchief and used it to help stop the blood pouring out of my nose. “I’m so sorry about this. I had no idea he’d be here. I can’t apologize enough.”
I could hardly blame her, seeing her obvious depression.
“Let’s get these prayers done,” I said. “We still haven’t fulfilled your promise yet, have we?”
“All right.”
We followed after Serge and Lelia, heading for the monument located farther in.

***

“This is way smaller than I thought it would be.”
When I’d heard the Sacred Tree was guarding a monument, I’d expected something huge and imposing, but it was actually pretty tiny. The tree had, however, wrapped its roots in such a way as to protect it.
“Okay, so we just need to pray to this thing?” I asked.
Miss Louise nodded. “Clasp your hands together. Yes, like that. Then close your eyes and pray. They say that if your prayers and wishes reach the tree, it will actually respond.”
Serge, who was still throwing a hissy fit, snorted derisively. “That’s just a load of crap they feed the kids. I mean it has to be, right? ’Cause if the tree actually did listen to people’s wishes, your little brother wouldn’t be dead. Or maybe…the truth is you never prayed for him to begin with.”
Miss Louise wrapped her arms around herself.
Even Lelia felt uncomfortable with the situation. “Serge, let’s just pray and get out of here.”
“Yeah. As long as I can finish what I came here to do, I don’t really give a crap.”
As he prayed, I scowled at him. “You’re a real piece of work.”
“What’s that?”
I kept my mouth shut and closed my eyes to pray.
Suddenly, the ground beneath us shook. I opened my eyes and panicked as I realized that light was spilling out of Miss Louise.

“Huh? Wh-what’s going on?” she stammered. She was just as lost as I was. The crest on the back of her hand was glowing too.
“Luxion, can you tell me what’s going on?!” I asked, desperate.
“I am uncertain.”
Lelia turned to Ideal. “Any idea what this is?”
“I am currently looking into it. Oh? It seems…”
A voice suddenly echoed through the cave. No… It wasn’t in the cave; it was in my head.
“Offer a…to flower…top of the…human…”
“What was that?” I held a hand to my head as I scanned the area, but there was no other presence in the room.
Luxion gazed up at the ceiling. “The Sacred Tree is sending us a message.”
“A plant is talking to us?!”
“I do believe it would be best not to think of the Sacred Tree as an ordinary plant. At any rate, I have finished parsing what we just witnessed.” He proceeded to play back the voice we had just heard, though this time it was much clearer, and the contents of its command were horrifying.
“Offer a girl to the flower at the top of the tree: a human sacrifice.”
“A human what now?” My eyes turned to Miss Louise, who had crumpled to her knees and once again had her arms tightly wrapped around herself.
“Miss Louise!”
I threw my arms around her as well to pull her up. Knowing the circumstances in the republic and everything else that had been going on, I had a bad feeling about this.
My voice turned hard as I turned to the others. “Listen to me. Don’t speak of this to anyone after we leave.”
Lelia was taken aback. “B-but…”
“I mean it! I’ll take care of this. So you’d better not breathe a word.”
I kept an arm around Miss Louise as we headed for the exit.
She mumbled something as we went. “I heard a voice.”
“It’s all right,” I told her. “I won’t let you be sacrificed. As long as we don’t say anything, no one will ever know.”
“No. No, that’s not what I mean,” she said, breathless. “I heard Leon’s voice. I mean, I can *still* hear his voice.”
“What…?”
She was trembling, tears rolling down her cheeks.

***

Louise continued to lean on Leon for support as a familiar voice trickled into her ear. It sounded just like the little brother she had lost, but he seemed to be in a great deal of pain.
“It hurts… Big Sis… Save me…”

Louise clamped her hands over her ears, but he spoke directly into her head. The source seemed to be the crest on her right hand. And he sounded so, so miserable.
“I’m scared, Big Sis. I… I’m so lonely. I’m all alone inside the tree.”
The tears fell faster. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Leon. I swear I’ll save you. So please, just…hold on a little longer.” Once she imagined her helpless little brother trapped in the tree, she couldn’t stop sobbing. “I promise I’ll be with you soon.”
The little brother she’d been unable to save all those years ago was calling out to her, begging to see her again. From Louise’s perspective, that was reason enough to agree to be sacrificed.
As she sniffled, Ideal called to her. “Are you all right? You say you’re hearing some kind of voice?”
“Yes, I can hear it… My little brother.”
“What kind of voice is it?”
“He sounds like he’s in pain,” she said. “I have to save him… I have to save Leon. I can’t fail him this time.”
“Even if it means sacrificing your own life?” Ideal asked.
As she nodded, Leon batted the robot away. “What’s the big idea, huh?!”
“Oh, pardon me. She just seemed to be in a state of confusion, so I was trying to gather information. Hm? It seems it would be prudent for you to hurry out of here.”
Leon continued guiding Louise toward the exit. “Miss Louise, please don’t say anything to anyone once we get out of here. Got it?”
Louise understood that Leon was trying to protect her, but she was beginning to think of his actions as unwanted meddling.
I know you’re worried about me, but…I’m sorry. I have to go to him. This is the least I can do to make up for everything.

***

As everyone else rushed to flee the cave, Ideal lingered behind and gazed at the monument. He remained floating there for a while, at least until a distant voice called him.
“Ideal, where are you?!”
Slowly, he drifted toward the exit. By the time he made his way back to Lelia, he was his normal self.
“My apologies for my slowness.”
“This isn’t the kind of time to dillydally!” she snapped.

Chapter 5:
Human Sacrifice

ONCE WE MADE our way out, we found the event venue in an uproar. Everyone's eyes turned to us as we exited.
"Huh?" I blurted out, arm still wrapped around Miss Louise. I had a bad feeling about this. The faces in the crowd said all I needed to know. But if that hadn't been enough…
"By human sacrifice, did it mean…"
"I heard the Sacred Tree's voice too. Do you think…"
"Wh-what should we do?"
It seemed we weren't the only ones who'd received that eerie message.
I gritted my teeth. "Luxion, worst-case scenario…"
"You wish me to remove Louise from this location, yes? In that case, the sooner, the better. I will prepare a small ship for you. After that, we can board either the *Einhorn* or the *Licorne* and make for Holfort Kingdom."
As I planned to help her escape, Miss Louise peeled out of my embrace.
"Thank you, Leon, but that won't be necessary."
"What?"
Knights clad in armor raced over to us and surrounded her. Another group tried to encircle Lelia, but Serge snarled at them. "What's the meaning of this?"
"Lord Serge, please hand over that young lady. We are completely in the dark as to what is going on, but we do know the Sacred Tree is looking for a young girl as a sacrifice. The moment we heard the tree's words, a bright light suddenly flashed inside the cave. If one of these two girls is the sacrifice, then—"
"Don't lay a single finger on Lelia!" Serge raised his fists, ready to fight them off if he had to.
"Stop!" Miss Louise bellowed.
I caught a glimpse of Mr. Albergue in the distance, hurrying toward us. But before he could arrive, Miss Louise spoke, "I am the one the tree selected. That girl has nothing to do with this."
As soon as the knights heard that, they exchanged glances.
I grabbed Miss Louise's hand. "What are you saying?!"
"It's fine. I heard it. My little brother is inside the Sacred Tree…and he's suffering."
"Your little brother is what?"
That was what she'd heard? I glanced at Luxion, but he moved his eye from side to side as if shaking his head. "I heard nothing of the sort."
Miss Louise tried to leave with the knights, but I strengthened my grip on her hand. What in the world was going on? I couldn't even begin to imagine what would happen to her, but something inside me screamed not to let go.

“This has to be a misunderstanding,” I insisted. “This is all wrong.”
No matter how I tried to persuade her, Miss Louise had made up her mind. “I’m sorry for getting you wrapped up in something so crazy, but I want to go to where Leon is. I was never able to do anything for him while he was alive, but if I can meet him just one more time before it’s all over, that’s enough for me.”
Miss Louise’s fingers were so gentle as they pried mine off, and soon, she was leaving.
Mr. Albergue managed to seize her by the shoulders before she got far. “Louise! What’s going on? What’s this nonsense about you being a human sacrifice?”
“It’s exactly what it sounds like. I promise I’ll explain things to you later, Father.”
I stood there, frozen solid, unable to do anything.
Serge shoved his hands into his pockets and marched past me. “Leon this, Leon that. That’s all she cares about. Why’s that dead little kid so important to her anyway? I don’t get it at all.” He paused and glanced at me. Seeing that I was still gaping, he snorted. “Well, since she’s got the real thing now, she doesn’t need you anymore. Run along home.” The burning hatred he’d shown me moments ago was nowhere to be found now. “Come on, Lelia.”
“R-right…”
The two of them took their leave.
I didn’t give a rat’s ass about Serge, honestly. I was more concerned about why the Sacred Tree was demanding a human sacrifice in the first place. Marie had never mentioned anything like that. Lelia couldn’t have known either, given how stunned she looked.
Something wasn’t right. Events in Holfort hadn’t completely adhered to the game scenario either, but there was something more sinister at play in Alzer.
“Luxion, find out what’s going on,” I said.
“Never a dull moment with you, Master.”
“Something stinks. I need to get back and ask Marie about this.”
“Is that your intuition speaking?”
“Usually when I get a bad feeling, I’m on the mark.”
I wasn’t about to say I had perfect intuition, but I did get pretty accurate premonitions when things were going sour.
I left the clamor of the crowd behind, pausing only once to glance up at the Sacred Tree.

***

As Lelia and Serge walked, Emile made his way over, pushing through the crowd to reach them. His suit was in disarray, but he didn’t pay that any heed.

“Emile,” Lelia gasped. Before she could say anything else, he grabbed Serge.
“Explain yourself! I heard you forcibly dragged Lelia into the cave. Why would you do something like that?!”
It was only natural for Emile to be livid, since he and Lelia were engaged, but Serge didn’t have the energy to waste on him. Annoyed, he sneered.
“Quit whining. My old man wants to see me, so I don’t have time to play with you.”
Serge had been in the cave with Louise when the Sacred Tree chose her as its sacrifice. Thus, Albergue had summoned him so he could hear the full story. Serge scrunched his face, already thinking about what a pain things would be now, thanks to this mess. From an external point of view, it probably looked like he was mocking Emile.
“What, so you’re just going to run away?” Emile clutched Serge’s collar, despite being much smaller and less muscular. It was no surprise Serge was easily able to shove him off and send him stumbling back.
“Whoa!” Lelia gasped, rushing over to Emile’s side as he fell.
Seeing her fuss over Emile only pissed Serge off even further. “Lelia, if you ever get sick of this pathetic excuse for a man, you know where to find me. I’d welcome you with open arms. You’d rather have someone you could rely on, yeah? Someone like me. I’ll show you what you’re missing out on soon enough, so don’t worry.”
Emile glanced at Lelia. The suspicion in his eyes reminded her of the kiss she had shared with Serge inside the cave. For that reason, she couldn’t completely defend her own actions.
As Serge took his leave, Emile and Lelia remained frozen in place—at least until Emile seized her by the shoulders, squeezing. “Lelia, I want you to be honest with me. Did something happen between you and Serge?”
“N-no, of course not.”
“Look me in the eyes and say that. I… I…!” Emile burst into tears.
Lelia felt the weight of the crowd’s eyes, and when she glanced around, she noticed a bunch of onlookers had gathered.
“Is that Lord Emile of House Pleven?”
“And that girl there is from Lespinasse, isn’t she?”
“What? But just a moment ago, didn’t she and Lord Serge…”
Whispers erupted, heightening Lelia’s embarrassment. She grabbed Emile’s hand and jumped to her feet. Anxious to put some distance between herself and the other nobles, she tried to pull Emile along, but he wasn’t having it.
“Lelia, give me an answer!”
Annoyed, she finally snapped, “Cut it out already!”
“…Lelia?”
“I really hate this about you. You always act so fragile and delicate, and then you have the audacity to doubt me. There’s nothing between me and Serge. Have a little faith in me, would you?”

“B-but even you have to see that it’s way out of bounds for you two to go into the cave together! You promised you would go with me, didn’t you? And you did it in front of everyone. I can’t just let that go. Serge is basically insulting me at this point. I have my pride as a man of the Six Great Houses. I can’t keep looking the other way when he does this stuff!”
Lelia felt like he’d poured a bucket of cold water over her head.
You’re exaggerating like crazy. Pride as a man of the Six Great Houses? What nonsense. Show a little more concern for me, why don’t you? You really aren’t remotely considerate.
There was a disconnect; Lelia couldn’t fathom the emphasis he placed on his noble pride. Thanks to her previous life experience, she didn’t see much value in something so superficial. It seemed like Emile was prioritizing his status over her. The feelings she’d had for him suddenly evaporated.
I picked him out of consideration for my future, but maybe I was mistaken.
“Fine, I get it,” she said. “Your pride is way more important than I am.”
“Lelia?”
“If you want to pick a fight with Serge, have at it. But it’ll only make me think less of you. It’s ridiculous you’re acting like this over something so stupid.”
“B-but this is—”
“I don’t want to hear it! Ugh, this just irritates me even more! Stop making excuses.”
Lelia was sick of his “but this” and “but that,” completely oblivious to the fact that she had made similar excuses herself. She left Emile behind and headed home by herself.
Emile stood rooted in place, staring down at his feet. Lelia glanced back once as she left and found herself disgusted by how pathetic he looked.
Why did I even pick someone like Emile? I would have been better off picking Serge from the beginning, if I’d known it’d be like this.

***

When I returned to Marie’s estate, I informed her of what had transpired at the festival. Namely, that the Sacred Tree had chosen Miss Louise as a human sacrifice, and that she had heard her dead little brother’s voice and thus decided she was willing to go along with its demands.
Marie was flabbergasted. “Why would she want to be a human sacrifice just because her dead little brother is suffering? I don’t understand at all.”
Yeah, it did sound a little odd.
“How the hell would I know? All I can tell you is she jumped on the chance to become a sacrifice, and she said it was because of her dead brother.”
We were gathered in an empty room with Cleare and Luxion listening in. I couldn’t tell the idiot brigade about this, which was why we were meeting in secret.

“Uh…okay, hold on. I’m pretty sure there was no business about a human sacrifice in the second game,” said Marie. “Besides, the New Year’s Festival is supposed to be all about the protagonist showing off that she’s dating her love interest. That’s the whole point.”
“And what was Miss Louise’s role in all that? How was she involved in the story by then? And what’s supposed to happen next?” I asked in rapid-fire succession.
Sensing my impatience, Marie promptly responded. “Uh, let’s see… She asks whatever love interest she’s picked if they’re really sure they want to be with a woman like her. I don’t remember the exact lines, but there was absolutely nothing about anyone being chosen as a *human sacrifice*. And if there were, it couldn’t be Louise; in the end, she’s convicted of all the crimes she perpetrated over the course of the story.”
Leaving the conviction stuff aside, if Miss Louise really did have a role up until the very end of the game, it made no sense for her to be sacrificed to anything part way through. This was clear evidence that we were experiencing an anomaly.
“What’s happening here?” I paused and corrected myself, “Or rather, what’s going to happen now?” I pressed a hand over my mouth and racked my brain.
“Knowing you, you probably made a big ol’ mess of things by getting involved, right?” Cleare said. “Anyway, if you’re so keen on saving the damsel in distress, we’d better hop to. You *are* going to save her, aren’t you?”
That was a no-brainer; of course I was going to save her. How could I stand by and let Miss Louise be sacrificed? My problem was that she was dead set on offering herself as a willing victim. It would be tough to talk her out of it. Was dragging her away my only option?
“I guess we can sneak in there and grab her, see what’s going on. Luxion, let’s get going.” When he didn’t immediately respond, I turned toward him. “Luxion?”
Luxion was even more unresponsive than usual, and something about him seemed different as well. Like he was more guarded. He’d been so blasé up until this point, offering to annihilate all the new humans whenever I desired, but not this time.
“Master, I have some unfortunate news,” he said.
“Unfortunate? In what way?”
“I suspect it will be near impossible to successfully rescue Louise.”
“What do you mean? That even you can’t pull it off?” How could something so simple be so hard that even Luxion wasn’t confident?
“We won’t be able to sneak around without being noticed,” Luxion clarified. “The problem is Ideal.”
“Ideal, huh? What about him?”
“He has deployed special security devices he made himself. I have further confirmed that he has defensive measures in place.”

“Wait. You’re not telling me that Lelia turned on us, are you?”
Was she really going to stab me in the back now of all times? No, given her position, it was more likely she saw Miss Louise as a bigger threat than me. But would she really be willing to go to such lengths to take her out? She didn’t seem that ruthless. For better or worse, she was like me in that she still carried the cultural ideas and morals instilled in her during her previous life.
Upon hearing the name Ideal, Marie leaned forward, wanting more information. She hadn’t used the cash shop in the second game, so she knew very little about him.
“He’s a cheat item—a warship—from the second game, right? What was he like?” she asked.
Luxion explained, “He is a transport vessel created by the old humans. However, it’s highly possible that his information-gathering capabilities outstrip my own. Although, the circumstances are likewise highly unnatural.”
Cleare shared his suspicions. “Would a transport vessel really have any need for such abilities? None of my data suggests that one would.”
“That is precisely why I am at a loss,” said Luxion. “He only left standby mode recently, but he was nevertheless able to hide from me for all the time prior to his awakening. It shows he’s a real threat.”
Now that Ideal was in the mix, we weren’t going to be able to move as freely as we had before. He was proving to be a real problem.
“So what are you going to do, Big Bro?” asked Marie. “It’d be difficult to steal her back, right? And if we aren’t careful, we could cause an international scandal big enough that we won’t be able to talk ourselves out of it.”
“Yeah, things sure have gotten complicated.”
The biggest issue was that, where the Alzer Republic was concerned, anything related to the Sacred Tree was considered holy. They would do anything to appease the tree, even if it meant offering someone’s life on a platter. They would absolutely get in the way if I tried to save Miss Louise.
“Oh, I’ve got it!” Marie snapped her fingers. “How about we just have Luxion burn the flower off the tree? If we do that, then this whole sacrifice nonsense should go away.”
“I would love to do that, but…” I glanced at Luxion, who moved his eye from side to side.
“Ideal has defensive measures in place against that as well. If we try to do anything, especially something as serious as attacking the Sacred Tree, it will cause a rift between the republic and the kingdom.”
“Well, then what are we supposed to do?!” Marie demanded, cradling her head in her hands.
That was the issue; none of us knew.

Luxion glanced at me. “Master, what do you propose? If we choose to face Ideal, I swear I won’t lose, but we will suffer losses. Furthermore…I still don’t know the full extent of Ideal’s capabilities.”
So basically, even with Luxion in my possession, I wasn’t free from danger. It was time to imagine the worst-case scenario then, which involved actually going toe-to-toe with Ideal. I had no issues taking Lelia on, but Ideal was a different story. Before we faced him, I needed to stack the deck in my favor a little more.
“First, let’s get some information,” I said. “If we can’t hit him where it hurts, then we’ll have to take him head-on. Marie, if you can remember anything, let me know immediately. Luxion, you come with me. And as for you, Cleare…”
“Yes?”
“Go home.”
“What?”
“You’re not really any use to me right now. You can just come back when it’s time to take Angie and Livia to Holfort. Well, there’s your orders. See you around.”
In a rare display, Luxion actually agreed with me. “Indeed. As long as I’m here, you don’t need anyone else. We should have Cleare return to Holfort and work on whatever needs done there.”
“H-hold on a minute! I don’t like that I’m the only one being left out,” Cleare said.
“Shut up and go home!”
“Master, you big jeeeeerk!” She sobbed and flew out of the room.
Marie stretched a hand after her. “Hey, wait up! Big Bro, did you really have to chase her away? I happen to think she’s plenty useful.”
“Nope, it’s better this way. Luxion, let’s get going.”
“Understood, Master.”

***

The Six Great Houses had called an emergency meeting. The central topic was Louise and the matter of her sacrifice. Save for Albergue, the other five house leaders were in agreement.
“You truly intend to sacrifice my daughter?” Albergue demanded.
They had decided that if the Sacred Tree desired it, they were willing to offer Louise. None of them showed the least hesitation. As far as the Six Great Houses—no, all the people of the republic—were concerned, the Sacred Tree was a divine being.
Lambert grinned, clearly enjoying Albergue’s frustration. “The Sacred Tree chose your daughter. You should be delighted to hand her over. Honestly, I envy your luck.” His words dripped with sarcasm, clearly driven by spite.
Albergue clenched his fists so tight that his knuckles turned white.
Meanwhile, the other leaders continued their discussion.

“Digressions aside, this is the first time something like this has ever transpired. We should make a clear record of the events.”
“We must send someone from one of our houses to accompany her. Lady Louise requires a bodyguard. She seems perfectly willing to offer herself, but if she were to change her mind when the time comes, we would be left in an awkward situation.”
“Well, then let’s all send people from our houses.”
The way they all carried on without Albergue infuriated him. Even Fernand, whom he had shown much favor in the past, actively joined in the conversation with no regard for him. Fernand was desperate to foster new connections with the others after Albergue had abandoned him for his betrayal. In the process, he was happily laying out the perfect groundwork for sacrificing Louise.
“Gentlemen,” said Fernand, “there is one other important matter we must discuss. Namely, the Hero of Holfort.”
The leaders cocked their heads at the sudden mention of Leon.
“What does he have to do with this? This is an Alzerian matter.”
“Yes, that scumbag has no place in these arrangements.”
Since Leon had already burned him once, Fernand regarded him with the utmost caution. “He has a personal relationship with Louise,” he explained.
“And? What of it?”
The other men regarded him with perplexed expressions. They were skeptical that Leon would involve himself for such a petty reason. If he were stupid enough to interfere, he would cause an enormous scandal. No ordinary noble would go out on a limb like that to save a mere acquaintance.
But Fernand wasn’t the only lord who felt wary; Bellange had similarly been stung by Leon.
“Fernand makes a worthy point,” Bellange agreed.
Albergue had remained quiet thus far. Inwardly, he couldn’t help but smile bitterly. He suspected what the others feared would indeed come to pass: that Leon would be willing to save Louise. That was precisely why he didn’t want to put them on guard any more than they already were.
“I doubt he would make a move here,” Albergue said.
Bellange glared at him. “Letting our guard down is exactly what landed us in hot water every time before!”
Alas, the other lords present hadn’t personally felt Leon’s wrath, and they remained unconvinced of the danger.
“You’re speaking from the bias of experience.”
“Agreed. He couldn’t be so foolish this time.”
The way the conversation was going only stood to benefit Albergue, especially if Leon did jump in to help. Left unchecked, Albergue was certain he would be able to drag Louise back.
Perfect. If we can just keep up this momentum—

Unfortunately, Lambert, Fernand, and Bellange remained steadfast in their distrust of Leon and made no secret of it.
“That boy is abnormal! There’s no telling what he will do!” Lambert protested.
The others seemed to momentarily feel sorry for Leon, having someone like *Lambert* call him abnormal.
However, Fernand shared those sentiments. “It will be too late to act if we sit on our hands. We need to be prepared.”
Bellange shot a glance at Albergue. “Agreed. And we can’t be sure Louise’s doting father won’t get in the way either. I would like to think our chairman would never do something so foolish, but better safe than sorry.”
Albergue wanted to click his tongue, but he kept his thoughts to himself. Must be hard for a man like you to understand, considering how easy you found abandoning your own son.
He knew none of the nobles here would understand his relationship with Louise. As a noble, his affection for her made him the odd man out.
Fortunately, the other leaders weren’t convinced that Leon would intervene, so the military measures they landed on were half-baked at best. Fernand and Bellange were sour about it, though it was a small victory, and Albergue remained concerned about what would come next.
Louise, no matter what happens, I swear on my life…

***

Louise was sprawled out on her bed in the Rault castle. A few days had passed since the New Year’s Festival, but ever since, she had been unable to rest, leaving her gaunt and haggard.
Her parents were seated beside her bed, and her mother kept trying to wipe away her own tears.
“Why… Why is this happening? We already lost Leon. Why must I lose Louise as well? Why is it always my children?!”
Louise squeezed her sobbing mother’s hand and smiled. “It’s all right, Mother. Leon is waiting for me.”
This must be exactly what Leon witnessed before he passed.
In her mind, Louise conjured an image of him in bed, unable to get up after the illness struck. It made her heart squeeze painfully. Leon had been such a considerate boy despite all he suffered. He had been so precious to Louise, but she had been unable to save him. She had carried that weight on her shoulders for so long; it was her greatest regret. Her status with the Six Great Houses and the enormous power she wielded by the grace of the Sacred Tree—none of it mattered. None of it had saved her brother. She had been left helpless.
Albergue clasped his hands, clenching them so tight his bones seemed to creak. “There is no record of the Sacred Tree blooming, let alone asking for a human sacrifice. Louise, I will not let it take you.”

“Father, you know you can’t stop it. I heard the other great nobles already held a meeting. They have sent their own knights to our castle, and they’re keeping a close eye on me, aren’t they?”
Louise was right; the other houses had sent troops to guard her. They had claimed it was for Louise’s protection, but in reality, they were keeping tabs on her.
Chagrined by his own powerlessness, Albergue dropped his gaze to the floor. “Everyone agreed to it, aside from me. So, it’s true; by majority vote, they decided to go ahead with the sacrifice.”
“Darling!” his wife protested, tears streaming down her face. “Do you really mean to let them take her from us?!”
Albergue slowly rose to his feet, his brows furrowed with determination.
“Father, you mustn’t. I *have* to be the sacrifice. Leon is waiting,” said Louise.
“Even assuming what you’re saying is true and he really is alone inside the Sacred Tree, I still can’t allow it. I don’t care if it means making an enemy of the other houses—I will do everything in my power to stop this.”
Albergue started toward the door, cracking it open. But before he could step out, a butler came running up.
“Lord Albergue! Leo—that is, Earl Bartfort has arrived!”
“What?”
Leon hadn’t arranged for a meeting with Albergue—not that there was any need to do so—but he still agreed to see him nonetheless.
“Very well. Escort him to my room.”

***

A butler led me into a study, and after I took a seat on the couch inside, Mr. Albergue promptly filled me in on the situation. He was considering launching an all-out war to protect his daughter, which made me all the more skeptical that he and his family could ever have been villains.
Well, I guess objectively speaking, the citizens would consider him a menace if he launched an attack, no matter how righteous his reasons.
If sacrificing one person would solve everything, humans were more than willing to look the other way. I hated that about our species.
“War, huh? That’s kind of unsettling,” I said.
“You will understand when you become a parent. No… I suppose as a noble, my actions should be condemned. I’ll admit it then; what I’m doing is wrong.” That wasn’t going to stop him from going through with it, though.
“Going to war with a whole country just to save your daughter, huh?” I grinned. “I kinda like the sound of that.”
“That’s unexpected. For a man sometimes called the ‘scumbag knight,’ I thought you would tell me to sit back and let them sacrifice her.”
Excuse you. It’s precisely because I’m a scumbag that I’m willing to sacrifice the majority for a single person.

“I’m the type of guy who prioritizes the people I know over a bunch of strangers. See? Pretty scummy, right?”
“Bwa ha ha!” Albergue burst out laughing. “I suppose you’re right. So that’s the way you conduct yourself. Yes, it is indeed deplorable, but I like the way you think. That said, I am clearly unfit to lead the country as I am.”
“Yet you still want to go to war?”
Frankly, assuming they did sacrifice her, there was no telling what benefit that would provide. We had no idea what consequences would come if they didn’t either. The Alzer Republic was simply terrified that by angering the Sacred Tree, they might lose the blessings it had provided. Their decision to offer a sacrifice just to be safe wasn’t entirely wrong, but I still didn’t like it.
“Last time, I could do nothing but watch my son waste away, so this time will be different. I will do anything to protect my daughter, even if that means going to war.”
“Five against one? Those aren’t winning odds,” I said.
“Indeed not. But if I must put my daughter and the country on a scale to weigh, my daughter is more precious. It’s that simple.” Mr. Albergue’s eyes shone with determination. It would be an exercise in futility to argue; honeyed words weren’t going to talk him out of this. If I said something like *“What about the people? They’ll suffer!”* He would likely respond with *“And what of it?”*
I shrugged. “What if there’s a way to get out of this mess that doesn’t involve fighting?”
Albergue paused, immediately sensing my implication. “You mean to take Louise with you? Would you be able to do so? If you fail, you’ll be a wanted man.”
“Don’t sweat it. I’m actually pretty good at this kinda stuff.”
“I don’t doubt it.”
I thought he would express concern for my safety, but strangely, he seemed to have complete faith in my abilities. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Did he think I was some kind of underhanded thug with a talent for skulking in the shadows or something?
“Well? How do you want to handle this?” Mr. Albergue asked.
“Before we do that, there’s one thing I’d like your help with. Do you mind?”
His eyebrows rose. “My help? If there’s some way I can be of service, I am more than willing to do so.”
“Thank you. Actually, I want you to tell me about your son, Leon… Can you do that?”

***

After Leon left Albergue’s study, a butler stepped inside.
“My lord, Earl Bartfort has headed for Lady Louise’s room.”
“All right,” Albergue said absently as he gazed out his window.
“You still intend to go to war, I see,” said the butler.

“I do. My conscience isn’t clear, but it’s too late to turn back now.”
“So even Earl Bartfort couldn’t sway you.” It seemed the butler had hoped Leon would talk Albergue down.
Albergue laughed.
“My lord?”
“We will begin preparing for war. What happens from there depends on the earl.”
“You have something planned?” the butler asked.
“I can’t tell you right now.” Albergue paused briefly. “But I must say, he really is heinous.”
Leon’s proposal had made Albergue finally understand why people thought him a scumbag. He felt truly pathetic for having to rely on Leon.
“Heinous?” the butler echoed. “Earl Bartfort doesn’t seem the least bit heinous to me, my lord.”
“You’ll understand soon enough.”
Why is it always my children that must be sacrificed? Had the Sacred Tree cursed House Rault? Is this my punishment for getting rid of the Lespinasses?
He couldn’t help but wonder.

***

When Leon showed up in Louise’s room, she was shocked.
“Leon? How did you get in here?”
“I came to check on you. You look awful.” He approached her bed and settled into a nearby chair. He left some fruits on the table—a gift.
Louise smiled. “Even emaciated, I’m still beautiful, aren’t I?”
“I prefer my gorgeous women healthy,” he replied jokingly. “Not getting much sleep?”
He could clearly see the toll these events had taken on her. Louise dropped her gaze, her expression dark. “Every night, I dream. I see my brother trapped within the Sacred Tree, and I’m powerless to help him.” She covered her face with her hands, remembering the day he had died. “Even though he suffered so much, there was nothing I could do for him. The moment I realized he was still suffering inside that tree—for over a decade! I… I couldn’t help but cry. He must be so lonely in there, all by himself.”
Leon listened quietly. When Louise started sobbing, he gently stroked her back. “That must be rough. You see this dream every time you go to sleep?”
Louise nodded. “He cries out to me, begging me to come to him. I need to at least do that much. It would be too pitiful to leave him all on his own.”
“You really do love your brother, don’t you?”
“Yes, I do. I was so shocked the first time I saw you. You two look so similar, I even started wondering if Leon would have looked like you, had he not…”

Louise had only known her Leon as a little boy, but if he had lived to be a teenager, she was sure he'd look just like the Leon before her. She wasn't the only one who thought so; her parents agreed.
"It's strange. After all this time, you show up, and now my Leon begs me for help."
It almost felt like destiny.
Leon let her speak without passing judgment. "You really think we look that much alike? I mean, with everything you've said about him, I feel like we're not remotely similar. As a kid, I was pretty obedient and well behaved, and I was also shy. Kept to myself."
Hearing this brought fond memories rushing back.
"The way you speak—even the way you lie—it's all just like him. But you know, I do think he was more the type to want to stand out. Oh, but I guess in that way, maybe you *are* alike? After all, you've become pretty famous since your arrival in Alzer, and you haven't even been here a whole year."
"That's only because people won't leave me alone."
Even that reminded Louise of her little brother. She was convinced.
You received the Guardian's Crest and saved Noelle from Loic. I just know if my little brother were still here, he would have done the exact same thing.
Louise reached out to caress Leon's face. He sat still without flinching away.
"Would you mind telling me more about your Leon?" he asked.
"Sure. I'm scared of sleeping, so I'd be glad to tell you everything. All our happy memories together. Let's see…"

***

Miss Louise was spread out on the bed, her chest slowly rising and falling. As I sat nearby, Luxion peeped out of the shadows, hovering beside me.
"Master, I used the sedative. She should be able to sleep without any dreams."
"You really are handy, you know that?" I paused. "So how's it look? What's our meddlesome AI friend got in store for us?"
While I'd listened to Miss Louise recount her various memories with her Leon, Luxion had been busy searching the interior of the castle.
"Ideal's defenses will make it difficult to extract Louise without encountering a number of problems."
"Oh? Are you telling me that Ideal is more capable than you?"
"He is superior in his respective area of expertise, but on the whole, I have reason to believe that I am stronger," Luxion said. "It would be erroneous to determine supremacy based on one aspect alone."
It seemed my question had gotten under his skin. Not that robots had skin, but still.
Anyway, we're in a real bind here.

Even if Luxion was stronger on the whole, Ideal could outplay him in his specialties, and we had no idea how to rank his combat abilities. It was still perfectly possible that Luxion would lose.
“But why the hell would Ideal even bother putting up these defenses in the first place?”
The question was directed at no one in particular, but Luxion ventured a guess nonetheless. “Perhaps Lelia ordered him to? There is also the possibility that he has some connection to what has happened to Louise.”
“We’ll have to look into that. All righty then, guess we’d better get going. It’s already pitch-black out there.”
In the short span I’d spent chatting with Louise, the sun had gone down. On the upside, I’d learned a number of things during my time here.
“Master,” Luxion said, “are you certain about this? Louise will resent you for it.”
I didn’t doubt that. “Bring it on. As long as she survives, I don’t care.”
“Master, you really are tactless.”
The last person I wanted to hear that from was an equally tactless AI.

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A short while after Leon left the castle, Serge was in his room, lounging on his bed.
“Tch. What now?”
At this point, it was basically set in stone that Louise would be sacrificed to the tree. Serge personally had no interest in all that nonsense, but Louise’s fate did weigh on his mind. He stared up at his ceiling, thinking back on the day he first saw her. He remembered it vividly.
“Wonder if she’d finally see me as family if I rescued her.”
The moment he caught himself wondering that, he hopped up and raked his hands through his hair.
“Why am I still hung up on that? I already know she only wants a replacement for Leon. That’s all she ever talks about—Leon, Leon, Leon.”
When they were younger, she’d always looked so happy when she talked about her dead brother. She was so torn up about him that the whole castle was dark and dreary. Serge felt as if he’d been dragged all the way there simply to replace the dead boy. And in a way, that was true. The Raults wanted an heir, which was why they adopted him from their extended family—to be a stand-in.
“It’s way too late… We could never be *family*. Not after all these years.”
A part of Serge still yearned to be accepted, and he couldn’t completely cut out that desire.
As he was lost in thought, Ideal suddenly popped into his room. “Good evening.”
Serge jerked upright. “You? What do you want?”
“Oh, I simply have some amusing information, so I came to relay it to you.”

“Amusing? Sorry, but I’m not really in the mood for that kinda crap right now.” Serge settled back onto the bed.
Ideal drifted toward him. “Really? Are you that torn up about your first love being chosen as the sacrifice?”
In an instant, Serge’s hand lashed out to snatch up the little robot. Ideal’s metal creaked under the pressure of his grip. Serge’s eyes were bloodshot and murderous, veins popping on his forehead. At any second, he seemed likely to smash Ideal to pieces.
“What’d you just say?” he demanded.
“It’s pointless to destroy my remote terminal. Even if you do, I can immediately activate another. Now please take a look at this.” Light shot out from Ideal’s eye, projecting an image on the wall. In it, Serge could make out Leon and Albergue talking. They looked to be enjoying themselves.
“What… What is this?”
“Video feed from a few hours ago,” Ideal said.
“What? I didn’t hear anything about this!”
“Because the people in this castle didn’t see fit to inform you, and because this man so resembles Lord Albergue’s deceased son. They’re moreover aware that you picked a fight with him earlier.”
Unbeknownst to Serge, Leon had made his way to the castle and spoken to Albergue. The mere sight of him made Serge’s stomach roil with anger.
I’ve never seen Father smile like that before. Not at me.
The only expressions he’d ever seen on his father were anger or exasperation. There was always something distant and cold in his face. But what about the way he looked at Leon? Albergue had completely let his guard down.
Serge gritted his teeth as the image on the screen shifted.
“This feed is from Miss Louise’s bedroom. They seem to be having fun.”
The smile on her face was exactly like the one Serge had seen that day when they were children—the one that had stolen his heart. But he never saw it anymore, at least not directed at him.
The light faded from Serge’s eyes as he stared vacantly at the screen, sapped of all life. “You like him just because he looks like your dead brother, huh?”
“Here, you can listen to their conversation,” said Ideal, initiating a replay of their verbal exchange.
“Talking to you almost makes me feel like I’m talking to my little brother again. I had so much fun, Leon.”
“I enjoyed myself as well.”
“If only…you had been…my brother instead…”
Louise’s voice suddenly cut off.
“Oh dear. It seems there’s some static,” said Ideal. “I will need to fix that.”
Serge suddenly released his hold on Ideal and threw his head back, laughing maniacally. “Ah ha ha!”

“Lord Serge?”
“Sorry about that. Good job showing this to me. Yeah, this is some pretty amusing info. I knew it. Everyone here only sees me as a substitute. Dammit!” Serge hopped off his bed and slammed his foot into the nearest piece of furniture. He went berserk, smashing everything until his bedroom was a mess.
As Ideal watched, he said, “Actually, that wasn’t the amusing part yet. You see, Leon has a Lost Item similar to myself. See? Right here. Look.”
“What’s that mean?”
“That item is the reason Leon has caused such havoc here in the republic. This other robot is a comrade of mine, you see, and I would love to be on good terms with him. But Leon is using him to make a mess here. It’s impressive, I must give him that.”
Serge didn’t know much at all about Leon, aside from him being an exchange student who kept getting into trouble. Admittedly, he was partly in the dark because everyone in the castle had avoided sharing information pertaining to Leon with him.
“So, what? He’s picking a fight with Alzer?”
“You truly didn’t know? Since he came, he’s destroyed two prominent nobles: Pierre of House Feivel and Loic of House Barielle. And he’s done all of it by using that Lost Item. He certainly doesn’t know the meaning of moderation.”
Only now did Serge realize just how ignorant he had been. “Why hasn’t anyone told me about this?”
“Well, I never dreamed you were so terribly uninformed,” said Ideal. “I assume Lady Lelia likely didn’t say anything for similar reasons. It’s common knowledge throughout the country at this point. Everyone talks of the Scumbag Knight from Holfort.”
“Scumbag? So you’re saying Father…I mean, Albergue was having a nice little conversation with this guy? He’s practically public enemy number one.”
“Yes. I assume this Leon’s resemblance to his dead son is why he can’t bring himself to hate the boy, no matter how much devastation he brings to Alzer.”
The whole situation was making Serge absolutely livid. “What the hell…?”
So even though he’s our enemy, Albergue’s willing to give this Leon guy a warmer welcome than he gave me—his own son—just because he resembles his dead kid?
Serge clenched his fists with determination. “Hey, Ideal. Lend me a hand.”
“Certainly.”
Serge stared hard at the projected image of Leon. “If this guy’s trying to act like a hot shot with that Lost Item of his, don’t you think he needs a bit of pounding?”

Serge had thrashed Leon during the New Year’s Festival with ease. He was convinced that if they faced each other without Armor or weapons, he’d be more than a match for him.

Chapter 6:
Ideal, the Supply Vessel

SEVERAL DAYS had passed since the New Year's Festival, and it was nearly time for Leon's fiancées to head back to Holfort.

Livia was sitting opposite of Angie. An awkward atmosphere hung between them. There were no other occupants in the room; Cordelia was making sure no one intruded.

As she fidgeted, Livia finally worked up the courage to say, "Uh…um!"

"Livia, I—"

They spoke at the same time, and another uncomfortable silence ensued. The girls scrunched their faces. Neither one was good at expressing themselves. Fortunately, their expressions were so silly and they were so eager to make up that they broke into grins.

"I caused you so much stress," said Angie. "Everything you said about Noelle was correct. I ignored her feelings, and I've been taking time to reflect on that."

Livia shook her head. "I was the one in the wrong. I didn't give any thought to your position and responsibilities, and I said such insensitive things. I knew you were taking a great deal into consideration when you said everything you did."

That was all it took for them to finally make up, but that didn't mean Angie had changed her mind.

"I'm sorry, but even now, I still think we should take Noelle with us."

"For the kingdom's sake?" Livia asked.

"That's part of it."

"And what's the other part?" Livia tilted her head.

"Noelle will spend the rest of her life as a target," Angie explained. "She's just that valuable." Other countries would stop at nothing to claim her if they could, all because of the benefits her Sacred Tree Sapling would one day provide.

"I understand that."

"No, I don't think you do," Angie countered, convinced Livia was too naive to truly grasp the grim reality. "There is no limit to how merciless and cruel people can be. Especially when a tremendous profit is involved, sitting right in front of them, ripe for the taking. They will do *anything* to take it."

"Angie…?" Livia murmured, confused.

Angie shook her head. "I don't want to go into details. Just know that if worse comes to worst, all that awaits Noelle is a living hell. Maybe coming with us isn't what she truly wants, but what do you think would happen if some other country got ahold of her and made her absolutely miserable?"

“W-well…” Livia didn’t really want to give it much thought, but she didn’t doubt that Noelle would be unhappy being forced to live in some unknown country. That, however, was not what Angie was worried about.
“If Noelle is miserable, that will weigh on Leon. That’s just the kind of person he is. I don’t want to see him suffer.”
The moment Livia realized Angie’s concern was centered on Leon, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry. I never dreamed you were thinking that far ahead.”
“Unfortunately, it’s only recently that I started analyzing future repercussions in this light. I hadn’t put quite this much thought into things before, so you have no reason to apologize.”
Livia dropped her gaze, but Angie threw her arms around Livia. In turn, Livia embraced Angie as well.

Angie whispered into her ear, “Honestly, I don’t really want any other women beside Leon, but he has a habit of stirring trouble. I don’t want to see Noelle miserable either, and as a noble of Holfort, I can’t just ignore the value she represents.”
“I feel the same way,” said Livia.
“I hope you can forgive me. I know this isn’t what you want either, but our only choice is to let her be with Leon. Even if we take her back to Holfort with us, we can’t hand her over to the palace.”
Livia nodded, and Angie leaned in close, pressing her lips to Livia’s.

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As Yumeria was busy cleaning the foyer, she paused and lifted her head. “The weather is so nice today!” She was in a chipper mood, and the warm rays of sunlight made her want to curl up for a nap. Fortunately, she managed to shake her head and focus on the job at hand. “I can’t afford to do that. If I don’t put some effort into this, Kyle will get mad at me again. It’s time to knuckle down!”
No sooner had she returned to her cleaning than a woman came through the front gate, a blue-colored robot floating at her side.
“Huh? Is that Mr. Luxion?” Yumeria murmured, dumbstruck.
“Hey,” Lelia said, not paying her comment any heed. “Are Leon and Marie here?”
Yumeria flinched in surprise before nodding several times. “Yeah… I mean, yes, miss!” She corrected herself, fearing her tone too casual. “They are currently here.”
“All right, then summon them for me. Tell them Lelia is here to see them.”
“A-all right!” Yumeria tried to scramble down the front hallway, but the second she turned her head, her foot slipped. “Eek!”
“H-hey! Are you all right?”
“M-my apologies. I’m a bit of a klutz.”
“Your name is Yumeria, right? You don’t have to be in such a hurry. Just go at your own pace and fetch them for me, okay?”
“Yes!” Yumeria peeled herself off the ground, dusting her skirt before scampering along.
“H-hey! I told you not to be in such a rush!” Lelia hollered after her. “Ideal? What’s the matter?”
“Oh, it’s nothing. So that elf woman’s name is Yumeria, hm?”
Yumeria had already disappeared inside the house, so she was unable to hear this question.

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“It feels like I’ve been in the dark while so many things were going on.” Noelle was sitting in the stairwell with her arms around the sapling, which was snug in its protective case.
Marie sat next to Noelle. The girls had grown close during Marie’s time abroad, and since she knew Noelle’s circumstances, she was doing what she could to support her.
“You can leave all of this stuff to Leon. The bigger question is: What are *you* going to do?”
Noelle continued cradling the sapling in her arms, unable to make up her mind. “I don’t know. I don’t feel like it’s right to have Leon look after me. After all, he’s already engaged twice over. Do you really think it’d be acceptable for me to impose on him?”
“He ruined your wedding,” Marie reminded her. “You should totally lean on him. Use him for all he’s worth.”
“That’s going a little overboard.” Noelle couldn’t bring herself to go to such extremes; she still had feelings for Leon.
“Well, you can mull it over for a while. You have plenty of time.” For as relaxed as she sounded, Marie was inwardly panicking.
We can’t just leave Noelle on her own, but my brother insists on letting her make the final decision. What are we supposed to do?! Ugh, I can’t stand this. Nothing is going the way it’s supposed to!
Marie racked her brain, trying to think of some way to resolve things to the satisfaction of all involved, but she didn’t get very far before Yumeria came stumbling up the stairs.
“Ah, Lady Marie! W-we have a guest!”
“For me?”
“Well, she asked me to summon Lord Leon as well, so I plan to fetch him next. If you’ll excuse—ah!” Yumeria was in such a rush that she tripped on a stair and banged her knee.
Noelle hurried over to Yumeria and helped her up. “Are you okay?”
“Y-yes. Our guest asked me to move quickly, so I’m trying to hurry.”
Marie saw no problem with making their guest wait, personally. If they were asking for Leon as well, she could guess exactly who it was. As she gazed down from the second floor, she wasn’t surprised to spot Lelia boldly stepping into the foyer, her arms crossed over her chest. Floating beside her was Ideal, the AI Leon had told Marie about.
While Yumeria left to retrieve Leon, Noelle made her way to the first floor.
“Lelia, what are you here for? Huh? Why does that floating round thing look exactly like Luxion?” Noelle asked, puzzled.
“A pleasure to meet you, Lady Noelle,” Ideal said in a friendly tone. “My name is Ideal. Luxion and I are…well, similar, I suppose. I do hope we can be friends.”
“Uh, yes. Sure.” Noelle was baffled; how had Lelia come to possess something that looked almost exactly like Leon’s familiar? Marie didn’t seem the least bit bothered by it, but Noelle couldn’t shake her confusion.

“You sure do like to show up out of the blue,” Marie said snidely.
Lelia flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I told Leon that I would come to speak with him a while back. But I’m more concerned about what the heck is going on right now.”
Since they couldn’t discuss anything in front of Noelle, Marie said, “Have a seat in the parlor for now. Leon will be along shortly.”
“All right. I’ll wait then. Oh, and in the meantime, I’m going to have a talk with my sister.” Lelia grabbed Noelle’s hand, pulling her along to the room.
Marie sneered. “What does she think Noelle is, just some doll she can drag around when it’s convenient?”

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When the two sisters reached the parlor and Lelia said her piece, Noelle was left exasperated. “You’re telling me to stay in the republic?” It wasn’t a question; Lelia was delivering a command.
“That’s right. I don’t think you’d make it abroad anyway, and it’ll be safer for you to stay. I’ll make sure of that.”
To Noelle, Lelia’s tone was the peak of condescension.
“What are you saying? Just because you’re engaged to Emile doesn’t mean you’ll be able to—”
“Emile won’t be protecting you. *I* will.”
“What do you mean? Emile’s the one who’s always looking for us, right? I’ve noticed at least that much.” Noelle assumed Lelia was only acting tough because she enjoyed the benefits of being engaged to Emile.
But this time, Lelia showed no intention of relying on him. “He’s irrelevant at this point.”
“What do you mean, ‘irrelevant?’” Noelle demanded. “Did you fight?”
Being Lelia’s sibling, Noelle could sense the conflict that had likely taken place. She was more right than she knew.
“That has nothing to do with you,” said Lelia.
“Of course it does. I don’t know what happened, but it’s hard for me to believe Emile would do anything to upset you. What did *you* do?”
Lelia’s face clouded, and she averted her gaze.
Noelle’s suspicions heightened. “I knew it.”
“I told you, it’s none of your business!” Lelia shouted. “And anyway, I don’t need him anymore.”
“What does that even mean? Especially after how much you—”
As the sisters bickered, a knock echoed through the room. Both girls turned toward the door, where Leon stood, Luxion floating beside him.
“All right, that’s enough of that,” he said. “No more squabbling between siblings.”
Marie scoffed where she was hovering behind him, “You think *you* have any right to say that? Not altogether convincing when you’re constantly getting into it.”

“I’m a total pacifist. I hate fighting.”
“Oh, yeah. I’m sure it’s a *total* coincidence you’re so good at it then.”
Leon and Marie wore smiles even as they shot death glares at each other. The sight of them made Noelle and Lelia sober as they realized how pointless their bickering had been.
Lelia crossed her arms. “I have to talk to them, so see yourself out.”
“Why?” Noelle demanded. “Why are you always leaving me out of everything?”
“You don’t need to know. Now leave!”
With that, Lelia managed to drive Noelle out.

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“You sure have a nasty attitude with your sister,” I said, exasperated with the forceful way she’d shooed Noelle out. Lelia had grown arrogant since obtaining Ideal. “You’d better stop letting your power get to your head before it comes back to bite you.”
I would have expected her to pull a face, annoyed by my unsolicited advice, but it was Luxion who got all shocked.
“Master, how many times have I told you to look in the mirror when you say that sort of thing?”
Marie concurred. “Pot, meet kettle. You’ve got some nerve, you know. Don’t you feel the least bit ashamed? As your sister, I definitely do.”
Excuse me! Do I have to sit here and take this from Marie of all people?
“You think you have a leg to stand on here?” I barked back. “Whatever, let’s drop it.”
“Hey!” Lelia snapped, trying to admonish me for my attitude. I ignored her. This particular topic was a waste of time. I needed to get to the point.
“Lelia, tell me: Why does Ideal have defensive measures set up inside the Rault estate?”
Lelia tilted her head. “What are you talking about?”
Marie put a hand on her hip and jabbed a finger in Lelia’s direction. “We can’t rescue Louise thanks to your stupid stunt! Enough of this nonsense. Get rid of those defenses.”
Lelia’s face contorted in anger. It was beginning to seem like she was genuinely clueless. “I have no idea what you’re talking about! Stop blaming me for everything. I don’t know anything about what’s going on with Louise, and the whole reason I came was to discuss what to do about it.”
Neither Marie nor I had expected that answer.
“In that case, it is that much easier to identify the true culprit,” Luxion said, his red lens focusing on Ideal.
“M-my deepest apologies,” Ideal stammered.
Lelia gaped. “What? Explain yourself!”
“Y-you see, I only put those measures in place because Lord Serge ordered me to do so.”

“Serge? Hey, hold on a second. I’m your master, aren’t I?!”
Welp, Lelia really was ignorant of the circumstances.
Ideal, similarly, seemed confused. “What? N-no. At the time you found me, I registered you both as my masters. Thus, the only people who can order me to take action are you and Lord Serge.”
“That can’t be.” Lelia’s jaw dropped. This was the first she was hearing about this. When she claimed her cheat item, she’d probably never dreamed anyone other than herself would be able to control it.
This is a huge problem. I frowned. “Of all people, it had to be Serge? You couldn’t have picked a worse person to share that kinda power with.”
As I’d experienced, Serge was the type to punch first and ask questions later. I hated him.
Contrary to my despair, Marie grinned triumphantly. “Well, that makes it simple. We can fix this in a jiffy. Lelia, order Ideal to remove the defenses.”
“F-fine, I will. Ideal, do as they’ve asked.”
Without missing a beat, he replied, “I cannot.”
“What?” Lelia gasped.
“Unfortunately, both you and Lord Serge are of equal status in my eyes. I cannot simply cancel an earlier order from one of you without sufficient reason.”
I glanced at Luxion. “Well?”
“Military AIs have a completely different command input system that’s unique to them. That aside, if we can destroy these defensive measures, we can rescue Louise.”
Given the circumstances, it seemed like we’d be able to avoid going head-to-head with Ideal too.
“The problem is Serge. I’ve heard he’s got a pretty complicated relationship with his family, right?” I glanced at Lelia, but she avoided my gaze.
“He was adopted into House Rault, but he never really fit in,” she explained. “He’s told me how much he wants a real family.”
I snorted. “Yeah, right. I’d kill to have a family like his. They’re amazing.”
There was no real point in comparing the Raults with my own kin, but at least on the older sister front, the Rault model had mine beat by a mile.
Dammit. Life would have been so much better if Miss Louise had been my sister instead.
However, since the Raults were the final boss in the original game, Lelia didn’t share my sentiments; she couldn’t see any good in them.
“How do you figure? Serge told me that he’s the only person in their household who hasn’t been accepted as a member of the family. I bet they only took him in because they wanted an heir. Pretty selfish to uproot him like that just because their own son died.”
On the contrary, I thought they were all incredibly kind. Albergue was even willing to go to war if it meant saving his daughter.

“Well, your opinion is kinda irrelevant,” I said. “Anyway, can I assume you’re going to oppose Serge on this matter? And Ideal, which side are you going to take here?”
It was highly likely we’d make enemies out of Serge, which meant Ideal could be a real threat.
Having sensed the wariness in my gaze, Ideal shook his eye from side to side as if exasperated. He reminded me of Luxion in that respect. “I would like to avoid prioritizing one master over the other if at all possible, but with the circumstances as they are, I will not be providing any militaristic backup. However, that is the extent to which I am able to compromise. I will not rob Serge of what fighting power he already possesses.”
“If you can promise that much, that’s plenty. We can handle the rest,” I said.
That was at least one issue out of the way. All that remained was figuring out how best to extract Miss Louise.
Having deemed that particular subject dealt with, Lelia changed the topic. “All right, now let’s talk about my sister. I’ll be as frank as I can. Since I have Ideal now, I am more than capable of protecting her. There’s no need to rely on you guys anymore.”
Marie scowled. “Quit getting carried away, you big snob. If my brother seriously wanted to, he could beat you into next week.”
Uh, why is she overselling me? I have no desire to pit myself against Ideal.
Although I had noticed that since retrieving Ideal, Lelia had become much more assertive.
“Oh? You actually want to fight me? Ideal is a military ship. Your Luxion is just a migrant ship. Do you think he’ll be able to hold his own?”
Luxion, who had been silent until this point, immediately jumped into the conversation, speaking at a rapid-fire pace. “Hm? I am shocked; I did not think you were capable of analyzing our fighting capabilities. Do you even know my primary strengths? If not, then it’s rather arrogant to act so triumphant. Military ship or not, Ideal is a supply vessel. Since you don’t seem to understand what that entails, I’ll explain as simply as I can: he’s not the type of ship that fights on the front lines. He utilizes his unique skills by staying in the rear. He wasn’t built for expertise on the battlefield. Were you not aware of that?”
“Huh? Uh…what?” Lelia glanced back at Ideal, looking for help.
“Luxion, please don’t pick on Lady Lelia,” said the other robot. “Besides, as much as I may not look it, I do have a wealth of experience in battle. It’s impossible to know which of us would win against the other. Or do you disagree with my assessment?”
“No, I do not,” Luxion answered. Even he couldn’t confidently claim he’d be the victor.
Guess that means something’s giving him doubts.
“Didn’t expect to hear you say that,” I said. “You’re really not going to swear that you’ll come out on top?”

“We were created to battle against the new humans, not to engage in a war between our own people. Thus, no data exists of battleships like ourselves facing off against one another.”
So they wouldn’t know how things would turn out unless they actually squared off. Aha, now I get it. Luxion isn’t sure he can win. I’ll have to tease him about it later.
Future plans aside, it was good that we’d been able to at least learn a little more about Ideal.
“So you’re saying you actually fought the new humans?” I asked him.
“Yes. It was a brutal war. I returned to our base in order to make necessary preparations, and that was where I waited for my new masters to arrive. Alas, a Demonic Suit breached the base and nearly destroyed everything within. I was fortunate enough to survive, only because I was left on standby and could not engage.”
Lelia’s brows shot up to her hairline. “Wait, seriously? Oh, are you talking about that Armor we saw in there? Is that what you’re calling a ‘Demonic Suit’?”
“Correct.”
And as if on cue, Luxion burst out into incomprehensible cursing, which he always did when these demonic whats-its were mentioned. “Asdfghjkl!”
Lelia retreated to the wall, maintaining her distance from him. “Wh-what’s wrong with you?!”
“Sorry,” I said. “He’s got a real hatred hard-on for those Demonic Suit things.”
Ideal bobbed his lens up and down as if nodding. “I understand how he feels. I also loathe them.” In spite of saying that, he seemed eerily calm.
Luxion’s eye gleamed menacingly. “Where is it? Where is this Demonic Suit? We have to destroy it. We must utterly decimate it beyond repair. Any legacy of the new humans must be wiped out.”
“Yep, I saw that reaction coming from a mile away,” I muttered.
“Please calm yourself, Luxion. I have already dealt with the Demonic Suit. It’s gone now,” Ideal assured him.
“Oh, very well then.”
Now that Luxion wasn’t on the verge of going berserk, I turned my attention to Lelia, who was still pressed against the far wall. “Anyway, I think we should let Noelle decide her own future.”
“Wh-why should I do that, huh?! The republic needs her and that sapling!”
I shrugged. “If things get dire and we need to rethink our plans, we can cross that bridge when we get there. But I don’t think the current Sacred Tree is going to spiral out of control.”
“B-but…”
The way Mr. Albergue was now, it didn’t seem likely he would become the final boss. Although if he were to lose Miss Louise, what would happen? Despair over her death might drive him off the edge. Keeping her safe was key to keeping the world from falling apart.

Oops, guess that means I'll be saving the world again. Man, it sure is tough being me. Especially since I'm out here rescuing humanity from disaster all the time.
Jokes aside…
"Noelle has a good head on her shoulders. Better than you give her credit for. So…" I left the rest unspoken.
Lelia stared down at her feet before starting out of the door.
"Ah, Lady Lelia!" Ideal called after her. "Please excuse us, everyone. Lady Lelia!"
Soon, they were gone, leaving Luxion, Marie, and me.
Marie wrinkled her nose. "She's let Ideal's power go to her head. Big Bro, you should threaten her like you always do."
"Don't wanna. And plus, what do you mean by 'like I always do'?"
She averted her gaze. "Lelia thinks of Noelle as an object. If we leave everything to her, she'll make Noelle miserable."
Though they were twins, one thing separated Lelia and Noelle, and that was that Lelia carried memories of her previous life in Japan. Perhaps as a result, she didn't seem to have the sort of sisterly affection you'd have expected.
"Well, what to do? Luxion, got any brilliant ideas?"
"Every time you find yourself in a tough situation, you turn to someone else. You really must think your brain is mere decoration, considering you never use it to think up solutions."
"I'm no good at that kind of thing."
"Oh, yes. You're always bad at it when it's inconvenient. But were you not also the one who said you normally make a point to be shrewd and cautious?"
I shrugged. "Humans like to say and do whatever's easiest whenever it's easiest. What can I say? To the point, what do you think?"
"Anyone who obtains immense power, you or otherwise, grows arrogant as a result. It's human nature, and I personally quite like it. I am sure if Lelia was burned once, she would wise up, but that will be difficult for us to arrange considering Ideal. That said…"
"Yes?"
Luxion paused. "Actually, no. It's nothing."
"Now you've got me curious. Out with it."
"It will only confuse you at this point. Once I have sufficient evidence, I will make my report. Arranging to save Louise is more important at present, if I'm not mistaken."
Oh, crap. He's got a point. I conceded. "Yeah, you're right. Guess I better get things together. Oh, and Marie, call the idiot brigade."
"Sure, but what do you plan to make them do this time?"
I grinned. "Something really fun."
Marie pulled a face, dismayed.

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After fleeing Marie's estate, Lelia hopped into the back of a car that Ideal had prepared for her. She stared down at her lap as the vehicle started toward her home. Ideal was in the driver's seat, but he called back to her, trying to offer comfort.
"My lady, please don't let it weigh on you too much. I see the thought and consideration you've given Lady Noelle and her situation."
Lelia nodded. "Yeah, you're right. No one else understands the lengths I've gone to for my sister. Everything I've done since I was reborn…"
Memories from her past life flashed through her mind.

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In her past life, Lelia had also been a little sister. Her older sister had been far more talented than her, which should have made her proud, but instead it meant everyone compared them constantly.
"Why can't you be more like your older sister?"
"You're such a failure. Your older sister was able to do this at her age."
Her parents always measured her against her older sister, and school was no different. When she developed feelings for a boy and tried to communicate them, he turned her down, saying, "Oh, but you'd be doing me a huge favor if you could hook me up with your sister."
Lelia had thought of her sister as a nuisance. When she was older, she got engaged to a man whose family ran a business. He was in line to be the next company president. He wasn't the most serious about his work, but he was handsome and fun to be around. Back then, Lelia had been proud of their relationship.
At the time, her sister was dating someone who clearly wasn't in the same league as Lelia's own partner, which drove her to think, *I can finally beat my older sister. No, I already have!*
She brought her fiancé back to her parents' house to introduce them, to show off how much better she had done. At first, her parents were delighted; they told him, "We hope you'll accept her, flaws and all."
Alas, her triumph was short-lived. A mere few months later, her fiancé began dating her sister. Lelia couldn't comprehend what had happened. When she grilled her fiancé about it, he didn't even act ashamed of his infidelity.
"Yeah, my bad. But the two of us just mesh really well, you see."
Her sister's answer was even more crushing.
"I'm sorry. But you know, I think you'll find someone way better anyway. So can't you be happy for us?"
Lelia clearly remembered the smile on her sister's face, even as she "apologized." Lelia hated it. She tried to protest to the rest of her family, but they all said the same things:

“You weren’t good enough for him anyway.”
“Your sister is a way better match for him. Go find someone else.”
They wouldn’t even give her the time of day. And so, she cut ties with every last one of them.
Her experiences had made her loathe the very concept of an older sister with a passion.

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As she thought about her former life in the back seat of the car, Lelia began to identify the similarities between that woman and Noelle. Lelia hated the very notion of being a younger sister. No matter where she went, her previous world or this one, she was treated like an unnecessary extra.
“I gave up everything for you. I even picked the most boring, unappealing love interest. So why aren’t things going the way I planned?”
It irked her that Noelle wouldn’t fall in line. She’d held herself back from any of the other love interests, opting for the least desirable, yet Noelle wouldn’t give the others a second glance. Worse, of all the people she could have fallen in love with, it had to be Leon—who, like Lelia, wasn’t originally from this world.
“My sister in this world is no better than the one I had before. They just take everything from me. On top of that, she was the one who got chosen as the Priestess. I was born into the Lespinasse house just like her, but I didn’t even qualify.”
Lelia was envious of Noelle’s role in the story. There had been a time when she’d naively thought that she might be special too, since she had been reborn as the protagonist’s twin sister, but reality soon came crashing down on her. Their parents had told her that, unlike Noelle, she lacked the qualities necessary to be the Priestess. That made her realize something.
No matter where I go, I’m just my older sister’s unwanted tagalong. That’s why I resolved to live a humble life. Why do you have to get in the way of even that?
As much as it pissed her off that Noelle wouldn’t follow the script, she was no less irritated at Leon and everyone else who kept giving Noelle a helping hand. Even though they had been reborn into this world like her, they chose to aid Noelle instead.
“At the end of the day, everyone always picks my older sister. I’m nothing but an accessory. But that doesn’t matter; I have a will of my own. My own ambitions.”
While Lelia continued staring down at her lap, Ideal eyed her reflection through the back mirror, and his lens flashed an eerie red.

Chapter 7:
The One Who Operates Behind the Scenes

"WE'RE GOING TO RESCUE Miss Louise, which means I need your help," I announced as I stood in the dining hall where the idiot brigade was gathered.

Julius, clad in an apron, put a hand to his forehead. "Bartfort, this isn't like last time when we rescued Noelle. Do you even have a plan?"

"My plan is to do whatever it takes to save her."

He stared at me, flabbergasted. "Tell me you've put more thought into this."

"Earl Bartfort," Jilk interjected, acting pompous as ever as he mocked me. "Pardon me for asking, but do you truly think the issue will be solved by a simple rescue? His Highness has misgivings because he's concerned with what happens *after* we rescue Miss Louise. Things won't end if we take her into custody. Last time, you fussed over the international scandal your actions would incite. Do you intend to ignore those repercussions now?"

He was referring to the incident during which Loic tried to force Noelle to marry him and I'd interfered to save her. I had waffled about acting at the time because of the diplomatic crises that would ensue, and it was then that I'd realized how capable the idiot brigade could be. Yes, they were absolutely useless under normal circumstances, but they did benefit from some of the finest education around, thanks to their nobility. Where a nation-wide dispute was concerned, they actually came in pretty handy.

"Dealing with the aftermath of this kinda crap is a huge pain, which is precisely why I'm relying on you guys," I said. "Come on. You remember last time, don't you? You're the ones who thought up the whole plan to crush the republic's pride."

I realized I was asking for the impossible, even more so than usual, but unlike me, these guys had been born and raised in this world. There was a non-zero possibility they might come up with an idea I wouldn't be able to think up on my own.

"If I'm remembering right, the part where Bartfort utterly crushed their pride was entirely of his own design," Brad said to Chris as he cradled a pigeon and rabbit in his arms. "Wasn't the plan we offered a bit more amicable all around?"

Chris nodded. "It was. Frankly, I felt bad for Loic for having to face Bartfort. He's an unmatched genius when it comes to tearing someone down and making them miserable." His earnest expression remained at odds with his choice of wardrobe—he was still buck naked save for a loincloth.

I put my hands on the table. "Come on, I'm helping provide for you guys. Give me something to work with."

Greg frowned. Reluctantly, he said, "I mean, we'll help you if that's what you're asking. It's true; we do owe you a lot. Problem is, if we don't know

how we're supposed to help, there's not much we can do. Who is Louise to you anyway?"
It was like a challenge. The unspoken question: Was she worth saving?
There was an obvious doubt to voice, but I was distracted by his muscles. He must have just finished training, because they were bulging more than usual. Also, there was the fact that he was wearing a tank top and short shorts. I guess it was too cold to go completely shirtless.
I'm just glad he's wearing anything at all.
"Hm… An older sister, I guess?" I said.
All five of them sneered at me.
Julius tilted his head. "Is this what people refer to as a 'sister complex'? Someone obsessed with their sister?"
"You're the last people in the world I want to see judging others," I snapped.
While the idiot brigade was busy failing to come up with any decent ideas, Angie and Livia strolled into the dining hall. They'd already overheard the conversation.
Angie took one look at me and shook her head. "You should be more careful with your words."
Livia, on the other hand, had her lips set into a grumpy pout. "Please be serious about this, Mr. Leon! You really do want to save Miss Louise, don't you? Then don't joke around."
Oh boy. Seems like everyone has the wrong impression.
"You have nothing to worry about. There's no issue with the rescue part. The issue is with what comes after," I told them.
Angie crossed her arms over her chest. "If you're acting that confident, there really must be a way to save her. But as you said, the real issue will be the consequences of doing so. If you're not careful, the diplomacy we've worked so hard to foster will vanish in an instant."
The republic and the kingdom had finally reached an agreement on reparations. If I wasn't cautious, their painstaking work would be for naught, and the kingdom would resent me for it. I didn't mind if it meant watching Roland suffer, but since it would mean trouble for dozens of other people as well, I wasn't going to chance it.
"Intervening now would completely win over the Raults," I reasoned. "Isn't there some way we can manage with them?"
Before Angie could answer, Julius stepped in. "The republic is extremely sensitive about anything involving the Sacred Tree. That's become increasingly obvious since we came here and saw it for ourselves. Saving Miss Louise is all well and good, but the republic won't stand idly by. The situation is overall too unfavorable; it wouldn't ultimately matter if the Raults sided with us."
True. The kingdom would be in dire straits if we antagonized five of the Six Great Houses.

Angie frowned. “Taking in Noelle would prove beneficial for us, but the same can’t be said of Louise. I understand why you want to help her, but if you stick your nose in this, we might end up at war.”
The Sacred Tree had already chosen its sacrifice, and my plan was tantamount to stealing it—or rather, Miss Louise. The republic would no doubt throw a fit. As Angie indicated, war might even ensue, and the kingdom would have more than a few bones to pick with me.
I wanted to save Miss Louise, but my hands were tied. The situation was vexing. This was exactly what I found so suffocating about being nobility.
“The other issue is that Miss Louise doesn’t seem to want to be saved,” Livia said, frowning. “Do you still mean to go through with it in spite of that? She said her little brother’s soul is trapped in the Sacred Tree, right?”
I was sure Miss Louise would resent me for rescuing her, but what of it?
“It’s not right for her to die for the sake of someone who’s already gone. Sorry, but the other Leon is going to have to sit tight. Besides, I’m skeptical of that whole nonsense to begin with.” Sadly, jaded as I was, I had a hard time believing what people told me. *It’s too bad I can’t return to being as innocent and gullible as a child, much as I’d like to.*
Angie’s eyes filled with sadness as she looked at me. “Even if you rescue her, she’ll hate you for it.”
“Well, she can get in line. Plenty of people hate my guts. Won’t make much difference to add one more. Besides, I’m used to it by now. Isn’t that right, you guys?” I grinned at the idiot brigade, who I was certain loathed me as well.
Julius’s lips thinned. “I suppose so.”
Jilk smiled back at me, no mirth in his eyes. “I envy your thick skin.”
“I’ll never forget the day you beat us senseless,” Brad said, his eyebrow twitching in annoyance.
Chris shook his head in exasperation. “Bartfort, that’s exactly what makes you a scumbag.”
“Yeah, you’re a real piece of work,” Greg agreed, a vein bulging on his forehead. “Anyway, we’ve agreed that saving this girl won’t fix the problem, so what are we gonna do?”
I sighed. “That’s still the question, isn’t it? I thought you guys would prove useful, but I guess I was wrong.”
That insult made them all glare at me.
Julius thrust a finger in my direction. “You have some nerve! You haven’t come up with any ideas either!”
“I’m the type of guy who sets my eyes on the prize and nabs it. You’re the ones who think up plans and help me follow through. So naturally, none of this is my fault.”
They immediately started trying to bicker with me, but Miss Cordelia suddenly interrupted. “Lord Leon, you have a guest.”
“A guest? For me?”

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An enormous, six-hundred-meter-long luxury passenger ship, which had been outfitted with weapons for this particular occasion, was making its way to the top of the Sacred Tree. It had a platoon of bodyguards in tow as well.

Since there was no record of the Sacred Tree ever requesting a human sacrifice, this was a first for all the people of the republic. No one had any idea what was going on. In order to discern how to handle the matter, representatives from the Six Great Houses had been sent to investigate. All the passengers on the ship were young men who were next in line to inherit their respective houses. Serge had volunteered to represent the Raults.

"This is way too flashy," he complained. "We'd have been fine taking a military ship."

Hughes, who had offered to represent the Druilles in his brother's place, said, "Are you stupid? We're not going to fight."

Emile, the Plevens' volunteer, sighed. "Enough. This is no time to bicker."

The oldest of the men was Narcisse of House Granze, who also happened to be a former teacher at the academy. "Precisely. In some ways, this is a historical moment. If we're really going through with sacrificing Louise, we must record every aspect of the event for future generations." As an academic, Narcisse was secretly opposed to the idea of sacrificing his former pupil. Even so, he couldn't oppose the decision the house leaders had made.

Although Hughes had been engaged to Louise not so long ago, he seemed relieved by the circumstances. "I can't believe the Feivels bowed out of this. Especially when my brother agreed to bring his own fleet to guard us."

The Six Houses' aim was to evaluate the performance of their heirs apparent. At the same time, the boys were relatively easy pawns to sacrifice if anything went wrong. There were supposed to be representatives from each of the great houses, but the Feivels had failed to procure a volunteer, instead sending troops and knights.

Serge turned his gaze to the boy sitting at the edge of the opulent room. "So Loic, an Unprotected like you is the Barielle representative, huh? Your house sure has fallen."

These provocations did nothing to stir Loic. "Yeah, I guess so."

Loic had little value as a noble; he'd lost his crest and his father had disinherited him. He was only here to act as a watchdog when they offered Louise as a sacrifice. His role meant he would get to see exactly what happened first-hand, though his life would be in danger if anything went wrong.

Hughes shot a glare at Loic, who continued keeping to himself in the corner, not bothering to interact with the rest of them. When Loic tried to marry Noelle, Hughes had sided with him, and as a result, House Druille's position had suffered.

“You know, it’s your fault my brother’s had such a rough time. You should be grateful for the opportunity to put your life on the line and repent for your actions.”
He wasn’t the only one who regarded Loic coolly; everyone else kept a wide berth too.
“Enough already,” Emile said. “Besides, Hughes, you’re partly to blame for that too. It’s not right for you to pin it all on Loic.”
“Hah! I never thought you, of all people, would lecture me.”
The five heirs were not on particularly good terms.
Narcisse sighed. “Haven’t you boys realized that Louise is having a harder time than any of you? At least keep it down so she can have some peace in her final hours.”
Disgruntled, Hughes plopped himself on the couch.
Serge, meanwhile, glanced out the window. “You guys better be ready. That Scumbag Knight from the kingdom’s definitely gonna make an appearance.” As he spoke, he grinned from ear to ear.
Hughes eyed him anxiously. “You really think he’s going to come? That he’s going to make an enemy of the republic just for Louise?” He trembled just thinking about it; he’d seen Leon’s power for himself. As much as he wanted to deny the possibility, he was terrified Serge might be right.
Serge scoffed. “Are you really shaking in your boots? Over that weakling?”
“Weakling?” Hughes echoed. “Do you seriously not understand what he’s bringing to the table? How about you take him down before you start running your mouth!”
“Yeah, I think I’ll do just that,” Serge said.
“Serge, do you really think you can beat him?” Loic asked.
“Stuff it, you creepy dog collar freak. Just because you couldn’t win doesn’t mean I can’t. I’m built of tougher stuff than the rest of you.”
Narcisse rubbed his gut as if he could already feel a stomachache coming on. “Leon’s going to interfere, huh? I’d prefer not to fight him, if possible. He defeated an Armor with his bare hands.”
Serge had heard that story, and it had done nothing to discourage him. “I bet he rigged that fight. Pierre only lost because he was an idiot.”
In a rare display, Emile shot a cold look at Serge. “Would you cut it out? We didn’t come here to listen to you brag.”
“Hmph.” Serge straightened himself, hefting a spear in hand as he stomped out of the room.

***

Before boarding the airship, Louise had spent some time bidding farewell to her family.
“I’ll be off now,” she said.
Her mother burst into tears, and attendants had to rush to her side to support her when she almost collapsed on the spot.

“You’re really going?” Albergue asked. “It’s not too late. I can still—”
“No, you can’t. Leon is waiting for me.”
Louise was emaciated. Every night, she’d been tormented by dreams of her brother’s suffering.
“Louise, you’re a terrible daughter,” her father said. “Children aren’t supposed to die before their parents.”
“I’m sorry, but I must see Leon again. I was unable to give him any respite when he was alive, so the least I can do is go to him now. Besides, if I’m absorbed into the tree as well, I’ll be able to watch over you.”
Albergue opened his mouth to say more, but he swallowed the words before he could speak them. They were surrounded by knights and soldiers beholden to other houses; he had to take care and let nothing slip.
Fernand was overseeing the fleet accompanying Louise as her guard.
“Chairman, I’ll take personal responsibility and see that the young miss is —”
“‘Personal responsibility,’ you say?” Albergue interrupted, shooting him an icy glare. “You mean you’ll take responsibility and kill her?”
“Chairman! We discussed this and came to a decision together, did we not? The Sacred Tree decided everything for us. We should see it as an honor! Your daughter has already resolved herself to her fate. It won’t do you any good to try to stop it.”
Albergue’s gaze fell to the ground. Honor? You think it’s honorable to sacrifice my own daughter? At this point, we are but slaves to the Sacred Tree.
If the Sacred Tree wanted for anything, the republic would offer it on a silver platter. That was the way of things.
Louise threw her arms around her mother. “I’m going to have to leave you now.”
“Louise, why does it have to be you? It was bad enough losing Leon. I can’t let you go too.”
After she embraced her mother and tried to console her, Louise stepped in front of Albergue. “Father.”
“I am proud to call you my daughter,” he said.
“Thank you.” She glanced around, scanning the faces present. Albergue immediately realized who she was searching for.
“He isn’t here, but he asked me to deliver a message: ‘I’m sorry.’”
“Sorry?” Louise pulled a face. What would Leon have to be sorry for?
Albergue explained, “He couldn’t stand to face you, since he was unable to save you.”
“That’s too bad. I was hoping to see him one last time.”
“Is there a message you would like me to relay?”
“Yes, actually. Tell him that I had fun and that thanks to meeting him, I was able to recall some of my fondest memories.”
Albergue agreed that Leon Fou Bartfort had an uncanny resemblance to his own son, so much so that it was at times difficult to mentally separate the

two. If his son had grown to the same age, would he not look exactly the same? It made him wonder.
“I’ll be sure to tell him,” Albergue said.
Fernand suddenly broke in, “It’s time. Shall we be off?”
Louise climbed into the airship. On the ground, Albergue wrapped an arm around his wife, drawing her close as they watched Louise leave. He muttered to himself, “I’m sorry, Louise. I hope you’ll forgive me.”
The regret he expressed wasn’t the kind one would expect from a father being forced to sacrifice his daughter; something else lurked beneath.

Chapter 8:
The Pirate Flag

WHEN LOUISE boarded the enormous airship, Serge was there to greet her. He stared, studying her. “Those’re some fancy clothes for someone about to go to their death.”
A white dress had been prepared for the occasion, since she was to be an offering to their divine Sacred Tree. In a way, it looked like a wedding dress.
“And why are *you* here?” Louise asked, shocked. It wasn’t seeing Serge that bothered her so much as his presence on the ship. If things went south, he might lose his life. He was the Rault’s heir; it was strange for him to even be allowed on such a potentially dangerous mission.
Serge carried a spear and was dressed like he was ready to go into battle.
“I’m just here to keep an eye out. To make sure you don’t run.”
“You really are despicable,” she spat. “You really think I would come this far only to escape?”
“That anxious to see your little brother, huh?”
Serge’s mockery was getting on her last nerve. Louise raised a hand to slap him, but Fernand caught her by the wrist.
“That’s enough, you two. Serge, you’re out of line.”
Louise freed her hand before marching off, ignoring Serge completely. A few bodyguards followed after her.
Fernand sighed with relief. “I’ll watch from the rear. If anything happens, I’ll charge right in to help.”
As he walked off, Serge called after him, “Better get ready for a fight, Fernand. The kingdom’s definitely gonna show up.”
Fernand paused and glanced over his shoulder. “So you think he’ll show up too, hm?”
“I do. No doubt in my mind.” After saying his piece, Serge left, mumbling to himself, “Now go ahead and show yourself. I know exactly what your weakness is.”

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As the large airship took off, it was followed by a number of military battleships acting as escorts. Fernand, leading the fleet, took the rear. They were headed to the very top of the Sacred Tree.
The representatives of the Six Great Houses, Serge included, stayed in a room close to Louise’s. Serge was parked in a chair, looking over the weapons Ideal had provided him.
Hughes peered over, curious. “Those are some unusual armaments you’ve got there. Did you find them on an adventure?”

Everyone knew of Serge's penchant for adventuring. Naturally, they assumed these weapons were Lost Items he'd found along the way.
Narcisse stepped closer. After receiving Serge's permission, he picked up a spear in his hands to examine. "Amazing, it's so light! How can something this large weigh so little?"
"It's light, but it's also durable."
The spear was equipped with a blade that allowed its wielder to slice as well as stab. Ideal had also furnished Serge with a gun of unusual shape.
"I've got enough for you guys too," said Serge. "Feel free to use 'em."
Hughes retrieved a gun for himself, but his fear of Leon and his crew hadn't completely faded. "You really think we can take him down with these? Dammit! Anyone with common sense would keep their distance. Why won't he?!" As a noble, he struggled to comprehend why Leon would go to such lengths to save Louise.
Narcisse refused to keep any of the weapons on his person. "I've gone into a dungeon with those boys, and I know the depths of their insanity. It was terrifying not knowing what they might do next. They truly are barbarians."
As the memories of his time adventuring with Leon and the other Holfort students flooded into his mind, Narcisse shuddered. He was reluctant to face them. "They're highly skilled. Both as adventurers and as warriors."
Hughes trembled even as he huffed. "Yeah, but in the face of the Sacred Tree's divine protection, they're powerless. The only one we need to be wary of is Earl Bartfort. I'm sure you can agree with that, Loic? You know the danger he presents better than anyone here." As Hughes mocked his former friend, he holstered his gun.
Loic already had a weapon he'd brought from home and didn't bother taking any of the ones Serge provided. "Yeah, I guess I do."
"Don't forget, Earl Bartfort carries the Guardian's Crest," Emile warned them. "It would be unwise to underestimate him or any of his companions, for that matter. We need to be on guard against any opponent."
"You have a point," Narcisse said, nodding. "Regardless, I doubt he or his fellows will bother coming. There's nothing to be gained by saving Louise."
The boys stared at him.
Serge, who was leaning back in his chair, sniffed. "He'll definitely come. And when he does, I'll be there to greet him." He spoke with such confidence about Leon's interference that Hughes's anxiety continued to mount.
"I'd just as soon he didn't come. Why does he have to go and stick his neck out, anyway? Louise has no ties to him."
"You don't gotta act so terrified, you know. He's only strong 'cause he's got that ship and Armor. Catch him unarmed and he's no more of a threat than any normal person. Plus, I'm tougher than anybody else. You guys know that. Right, Loic?"
Loic had lost to Leon, but Serge was confident he wouldn't meet the same fate. His daily training contributed to some of his self-assurance, but Serge

also had a great deal of pride to begin with. He'd hated being compared to the dead Leon so much in the past that he'd pushed himself to excel wherever he could. No one had given him proper recognition for his successes, which was why he'd stubbornly insisted on adventuring despite all opposition. He'd practiced and practiced until he was coughing up blood, and he never stopped a dungeon crawl, even when he was on the brink of death. As far as he was concerned, it didn't matter that Holfort was the supposed birthplace of adventurers; he wasn't about to lose to anyone.

There's no window in Louise's room. If he can't find a way to locate her from a distance, he'll have to board the ship and search for her personally, won't he? Perfect. I'm ready for you, Bartfort.

Ideal had also prepared defensive measures to counter Luxion, creating interference so he couldn't scan for Louise to locate her. That meant the only way for Leon and his companions to get her off the ship would be to infiltrate it themselves. In these closed quarters, they wouldn't be able to use Armors. They would have to fight with their own fists.

Same name and same face, which means this Leon and the dead one are practically one and the same. That'll make it all the more satisfying to kill him.

Serge flashed a sinister smile, prompting Hughes to regard him fearfully.

"You seem to think you'll be able to defeat him if he's not in an Armor or a ship, but I think you're underestimating him," Emile said.

"What'd you say?"

"I am saying that Pierre and Loic both made the mistake of taking him too lightly. Can you really be so sure you're the exception?"

"Don't act smart with me, you useless weakling!" Serge jumped up from his chair, slamming a fist into Emile, who went tumbling to the ground.

Narcisse put himself between the two. "Serge, cut it out!"

"Looking at your face pisses me off," Serge snapped at Emile, ignoring Narcisse. "You're so scrawny and pathetic. You could never make Lelia happy. You'd be doing her a big favor by breaking up with her."

Emile clenched his teeth and kept his eyes glued to the floor. Serge opened his mouth to egg him on further, but a blaring siren interrupted them.

"E-enemy attack! There's an enemy attack! A pirate ship is descending from above! Everyone, get to your stations!" A panicked voice boomed over the intercoms, but no sooner had it finished speaking than their own ship began to shudder.

Narcisse and Hughes took a fall, while Serge crouched to keep himself upright. Loic managed to stumble over to a window.

"What's going on?" Loic muttered. "Air pirates, really? Why would air pirates come so close to the Sacred Tree?"

Normally, military ships were stationed so close to the tree that air pirates couldn't approach. It was strange to see them here.

“Hey there, Alzerians. I’ve come to play!” Leon’s voice echoed around them, starting off light and chipper before abruptly dropping into a menacing tone.
Hughes’s lips trembled. “H-he’s here! Bartfort’s heeeere!”
He wasn’t the only one shaken by Leon’s abrupt appearance. The knights and soldiers on board also wore terrified looks.
“I bet you’re wondering what we’re doing here,” Leon continued. “I bet you think all this has absolutely nothing to do with us, right? Well, let me tell you why you’re wrong. For starters, Serge punched me that one time. I wasn’t able to get my revenge because of the whole nonsense with Miss Louise being a sacrifice, but it just keeps weighing on my mind. As such, I’ve decided to come and collect my due.”
Cold beads of sweat poured down Narcisse’s face. “That’s insane. *That’s* why you came?!”
As if he could hear those words, Leon went on, “I’m sure you must be wondering, ‘Did he really come here for something so petty?’ Yep, I’m sure a ton of people will belittle me for it. But see, I won’t be able to sleep at night until I give that bastard a good pounding. Now it’s time to have some fun!”
With that, the enemy broadcast ended.

***

It all started a few days ago. As I was racking my brain over how to save Miss Louise, the person who’d been sent to oversee negotiations with the republic came by. I met them in Marie’s foyer, and my voice broke with emotion as I shouted, “M-Maaaaaster!”
“It certainly has been a while, Mr. Leon. I hear you’ve been working hard.”
“Wh-wh-why are you here?! Oh, never mind that! Come inside. Please, I insist!”

My master was clad in a dapper suit, as befit a gentleman of his caliber. I anxiously ushered him into a room, where I carefully prepared tea.
Master was presently the headmaster of Holfort Kingdom's academy. He wasn't the type to pay the republic a visit for vacation. He was only here because the kingdom had sent him as a diplomat.
"M-Master, so…why have you come to Marie's place?" I asked.
"I wanted to see you before I returned."
I couldn't believe it. He had gone out of his way to see me when, by all rights, I should have been the one to pay my respects to him.
Master glanced at the other faces in the room and smiled. "It's a relief to see you're all in good spirits."
"Good spirits and then some," I said with a shrug as I looked at the idiot brigade. "In fact, I'd appreciate it if they'd be a little more well behaved."
They glowered at me, but I ignored them.
"I heard you managed to wrap up negotiations with the republic, Master. I would expect no less from someone as capable as you."
"Yes, it was a relief that I was able to settle things the way His Majesty desired."
Angie sighed. "It's rather odd that they appointed our headmaster as a negotiator in the first place, though."
"I am sure the officials at the palace have their hands full with other obligations. Under ordinary circumstances, they would have sent someone else," Master said.
He had done quite the service for the kingdom, which made me feel all the more terrible for what I was planning to do.
"Master, about those negotiations…I'm afraid my actions may cause you some—no, quite a bit of trouble."
"Oh? Is there some issue I am yet unaware of?"
Angie opened her mouth to spill the beans, but I jumped in to explain before she could. "Well, you see…"
When I told my master about how I wanted to save Miss Louise, his expression turned grim. "Mr. Leon, do you fully comprehend the ramifications of what you're trying to do?"
I knew that saving Miss Louise would create issues. There was also the problem that she didn't want my help, and she would likely resent me for it. On the other hand, if Mr. Albergue were to lose her, there was no telling the depths to which he'd fall. Keeping her alive would effectively prevent him from becoming the final boss. More importantly, however, was the simple fact that I *wanted* to do this.
"I do," I said. "Though I'm sure it will cause problems for you and many others."
Master nodded. "I already know nothing I say will dissuade you. When you say you're going to do something, you keep your word."
"Headmaster, pardon me, if you will…" Julius interjected.

Excuse you? What the hell do you think you're doing, butting into my conversation with Master?
"If Bartfort does this, all the terms you've hammered out will be for naught. Worst-case scenario, this could start a war."
Master sat up straighter. "I wouldn't mind. This is something Mr. Leon has decided for himself. I cannot stop him. I lack the power to do so."
"Master…"
It crushed me to think of how I would be inconveniencing him. If it were only Roland, I wouldn't give a crap. I even welcomed the chance to give him hell.
"You say you're going to save a woman from becoming a human sacrifice? That sounds like a knight's dream," my master said.
Angie crossed her arms, and her face puckered. "I admit, it does sound like something out of a fairy tale, but reality is always crueler than any storybook. The bigger issue is what comes next. Even knowing the repercussions, will you still not stop Leon, Headmaster?"
"I was sent to clean up after him to begin with. Besides, it's a master's duty to help his apprentice in their time of need."
Damn, that was suave. My master is badass!
While I gushed over him, Master turned to me. "Could you at least try to minimize the damage?"
"I will try my best."
"Splendid. Well, once you're finished, I will do what I can to renegotiate."
"Th-thank you!"
With this, I could cast off any of my lingering misgivings.
Noelle, who had been listening the whole time, suddenly lifted her hand in the air. She waited until everyone's attention turned to her before she said, "I-I wanna go too."
"Noelle? No, you can't—"
"I want to give Louise an earful!"
Everyone was shocked to hear this. Everyone except Master, who was stroking his chin.
"Hm. Seems there's some bad blood between you."
"It goes well beyond bad blood," Noelle said. "She caused all kinds of issues for me. But still, I owe her. That's why I need to be there when we save her, so I can tell her what's what."
If Noelle wanted to aid in the rescue, she could have just said as much.
"Aw, come on, Noelle. You don't have to hide how you really feel," I teased.
Luxion stared at me in shock. "You're the last person with any right to say something like that."
"Huh? What do you mean?"
When I glanced around the room, I noticed everyone giving me the same look. It was as if they were all saying *"You're the worst when it comes to hiding your feelings."*
Really? I thought. I'm pretty sure I'm the most upfront person in the world.

***

That conversation was what allowed us to bring the fight to the republic, worry free. For the occasion, the *Einhorn* flew a pirate flag.
Meaning that right now, we're just a bunch of unaffiliated pirates.
The *Einhorn* bore down on the enormous enemy ship. I was strapped into Arroganz, dishing out orders.
"Get your game faces on!"
A number of other Armors hovered in the air around the *Einhorn*. Luxion had put them together for me in a hurry. The idiot brigade was piloting them, and each one had its own unique features.
Julius flew a white suit. "I never thought I'd become an air pirate and save a princess."
Jilk's green Armor hefted a huge rifle in its hands. "Well, I happen to think being an air pirate suits Earl Bartfort perfectly."
He really is a snide little jerk.
Brad was piloting a purple Armor with a cone-shaped head. "Are you sure this Armor was built on the fly? It's way more powerful than ones I've been in before. No ordinary Armor could ever beat this thing. If Arroganz is anything like this, it must be practically invincible."
Inside the cockpit with me, Luxion shook his eye from side to side, exasperated. "Arroganz is an Armor I built specifically with Master in mind," he explained. "Its performance is on an entirely different level than these, which I built on short notice. That said, while they may not be my most painstaking creations, I expect you to be cautious with them. If you destroy them, I'll make you regret it."
All the Armors he'd made for this venture were larger than your average suit, although they were still smaller than Arroganz.
Greg, who was piloting the red Armor, prepared for battle as we approached the hulking enemy ship. "It's almost time!"
Chris was in a blue Armor wielding a claymore, and as enemy suits came flying toward him, he immediately cut them down. "Let's make short work of them!"
While the latter two sounded perfectly normal over comms, they were practically naked in their respective cockpits. One was in shorts with no top, and the other was still in that loincloth.
I wish they'd consider my feelings. I have to look at their naked upper bodies on the video feed.
"Master, I'm unable to confirm Louise's precise location. Ideal is jamming my scanning."
"No sweat. We'll break in and get her out ourselves. I'm still counting on you to do your part."
"Understood. I'll fly us in."
"Okay, boys, it's time to fight!"

The *Einhorn* slammed into the enemy ship, careful not to apply too much pressure lest it sink. A jarring, metal scrape echoed as they collided. Sparks flew from the site of impact, and the enemy ship finally halted.
“You’re not getting any farther!” I shouted as I jumped out of Arroganz’s cockpit, machine gun in hand. As soon as I landed on the other ship’s deck, I searched for an entrance inside. “Is it over there?”
It had originally been a luxury ship with a sizable deck. While it had been outfitted for battle, those last-minute alterations had done little to cover its weak points.
As I headed for the door leading in, two armed soldiers came rushing out.
“H-he’s here!”
“Kill him!”
They started shooting at me, so I returned fire. My rubber bullets were non-lethal, but they stung like hell. When they found their mark, the men writhed in agony. I ignored them and proceeded forward.
“Master, I have done as you asked.”
“Then get going,” I said.
Luxion flew off as I found the door I was looking for and ducked inside.

***

Fernand watched from afar as the *Einhorn* bulldozed into the enormous ship carrying Louise. As he stood on the battleship’s bridge, he stared at the scene, gobsmacked.
“Y-you have to be kidding me! Why is he even here? Why is he getting involved?!” Fernand’s noble sensibilities left him completely bewildered. His subordinates called to him for further orders, but it was clear by his expression that he was in shock and unable to properly issue any. Leon had instilled terror in the republic and her people countless times now, and knowing he was who they faced terrified Fernand.
“Lord Fernand! What shall we do?!”
“Wh-what a ridiculous question,” he stuttered. “We’re going to protect the sacrifice, of course!” He ordered his men to go on the offensive to defend Louise.
Alas, his men were similarly stricken with fear and unable to move.
“B-but our enemy is the Scumbag Knight. We don’t stand a chance against him. Moreover, he bears the Guardian’s Crest!”
It didn’t take a genius to see that morale was at an all-time low, and Fernand could do little to rouse his men.
Leon’s voice suddenly resounded through the intercom. “Do my eyes deceive me? Are you guys really not gonna come fight back? You can see the pirate flag I’m flying, right? You’re still going to ignore me? Don’t tell me you’re too scared.”
Fernand bellowed, “Cut the audio feed!”
“He’s hacked our systems. We can’t stop him!”

“So he plans to antagonize us, huh?” Fernand’s handsome face contorted, which only made Leon laugh.
“What’s wrong? I thought you guys would give me at least *some* trouble, but this is a piece of cake. Not that I expected much from you schmucks. After all, you’re a country willing to sacrifice a young girl to save your own sorry hides.”
Rounds of gunfire echoed periodically in the background. Leon had already boarded the ship and was fighting those inside.
“Fool,” Fernand hissed. “Do you understand what you’re doing?! If you interfere, you won’t get away with—”
“My lord, I don’t believe he can hear you.”
“Dammit!”
Leon had manipulated the feed so he could talk to them, but they couldn’t talk back. Even if Fernand wanted to order the other ships to move, it would be difficult to do so without comms.
Leon’s tone suddenly shifted, turning serious. “There’s one thing I’d like to say to you guys. If you’ve got a problem with what I’m doing, come get some. If it really eats you up that much, put me out of my misery. That is, if you think you’re capable.”
Fernand slammed his fists on the desk before him. “Do you honestly think we’re sacrificing her because we *want* to?! If you hadn’t pushed us to the edge to begin with, none of this would have happened!”
The lords would have shown more prudence in their debate under normal circumstances, but with the threat of a foreign power in the form of Leon looming over them, they had been burdened by the concern that the Sacred Tree might abandon them and leave the republic to crumble. This was the reason they had so easily thrown up their hands and given in to human sacrifice. The catalyst had been Leon.

***

While Leon and his companions fought above, Ideal reported the situation to Lelia on the ground. She was in the middle of lunch when the news came in, and the spoon she’d been holding fell from her fingers.
“Th-they really charged in? To save Louise?”
“Indeed. Your older sister appears to be with them,” said Ideal.
“Th-they even took Noelle?! Oh my god. What are those guys thinking?!”
Not good! I don’t give a crap about Louise, but if anything were to happen to my sister… Wait, hold on a second. I guess she doesn’t matter either. There’s no need for me to fuss over the Sacred Tree at this point.
Lelia stared at Ideal.
With him in my possession, my safety is guaranteed. If I wanted, I could even use him to rebuild the republic entirely. No…I could make a whole new country!

Luxion aside, Lelia was quite confident that no one else possessed the power required to beat Ideal. She could establish an alliance with Leon and the others, agreeing not to interfere with one another's plans. The more thought she gave the idea, the calmer she became. She picked her spoon back up and resumed eating.
"Oh? You sure cooled off quickly," Ideal observed.
"That's because I realized there's no reason to fuss over the Sacred Tree anymore."
"What do you mean by that?"
"As long as I have you, I don't need the tree. I mean, right?"
Lelia expected Ideal to agree with her and the conversation to end there, but his reaction caught her off guard.
"I have to disagree. The Sacred Tree must be defended at all costs. It will be absolutely essential to the republic's future."
"What? But—"
"Besides, this nation only exists because of the tree. Take that away, and everything is likely to fall apart."
Flustered, Lelia stuttered, "A-as long as I have you—"
"I will not deny my own value, but losing the Sacred Tree would be an enormous blow. I would appreciate it if you didn't treat it so flippantly."
Ideal was being harsher than usual, which made it impossible for Lelia to argue the point.
"F-fine, I get it."
"Thank you. I appreciate your understanding."
Lelia continued eating as she contemplated the future.
I guess that means my sister will continue to be the center of the universe going forward. Not all that surprising; she is a protagonist in this world. I'm more worried about whether Serge will be all right. He tends to overdo things.
"Ideal, if things get dangerous for Serge, will you step in to save him?"
"Why, of course," he said. "But are you sure he's the only one you want to save?"
"What do you mean by that?"
"Oh, I simply wondered why you didn't mention Lord Emile."
Lelia realized at that moment just how much more she valued Serge over Emile. Nonetheless, after a short pause, she said, "Make sure to save him too."
"As you wish."
Lelia gazed up at the ceiling.
When everyone gets back, I really am going to have to consider my future. I guess I'll start by annulling my engagement.

***

Three people had been left behind at Marie's estate during the mission: the headmaster, Cordelia, and Yumeria. The first was enjoying some tea when Cordelia asked out of nowhere, "Headmaster, are you sure about this?"
"Sure about what?" he asked.
"You must have realized by now. If Lord Leon causes another stir in the republic, it will have enormous repercussions. They may even have him executed, if worse comes to worst."
Furthermore, picking a fight with a foreign country and damaging international relations would only make Leon's standing back home suffer.
The headmaster glanced out the window. "That boy is a bit of a mystery."
"Pardon?" Cordelia furrowed her brows. "Um, to be clear, I'm trying to say —"
"That you're worried about him, no? Mr. Leon certainly is loved."
"Th-that's not it at all! He's even dragged Lady Angelica onto the battlefield. I-If anything, I find him infuriating! Obviously, I would prefer him to be more discreet, especially since Lady Angelica chose him as her partner."
"Yes, I am sure that would be for the best. At the same time, it might also be a mistake."
Again, Cordelia was baffled. "What do you mean?"
The headmaster was trying to say that saving Louise was the moral thing to do but a poor choice for an aristocrat. Leon had no right to butt his head into another country's domestic interests. Ordinarily, someone like him would only be able to watch helplessly as events played out.
"His actions are the pinnacle of chivalry. Do not mistake that as a compliment. I merely mean that, at times, Mr. Leon doesn't view things in the same way we do."
"Can you explain?"
"Mr. Leon sees the world through a very different perspective. I cannot say it's the correct perspective, but he has managed to sort out a number of international issues that have compounded over time."
Cordelia nodded. "You must be referring to the former Principality of Fanoss. Even I think his actions back then were heroic, but he's far too slovenly and undisciplined on a daily basis."
"No, no. That's not all he's done. He has saved the kingdom time and again. Lending him aid in this matter is my way of compensating him. Or I suppose it might be more accurate to say, it's my way of returning the favor."
Cordelia snapped her mouth shut, and the headmaster smiled.
"I have made all sorts of excuses, but I suppose in the end, maybe what I really want is to be able to see how Mr. Leon grows from here."
Cordelia's stomach knotted with anxiety. "I wish you'd take this issue more seriously."

Chapter 9:
Love Interests vs. Love Interests

AS THE ENORMOUS, remodeled luxury ship rocked back and forth, Louise wrapped her arms around herself. “Why won’t you leave me alone? All I want is to be by my little brother’s side,” she murmured.
Leon had infiltrated the ship. She’d never dreamed he would do something this rash. Louise’s personal maids stood nearby, all clutching weapons even as they quivered in fear.
The door flew open. Serge stood on the threshold. The moment the maids saw him, they visibly relaxed. As for Louise, his face was the last one she wanted to see.
“What do you want?” she snapped. “Leave. I don’t want to look at you.”
“Don’t gotta be so cold. I’m here to protect you.”
“*You* are?” She eyed him suspiciously, sure she had to have misheard him.
Serge’s lips curled into an off-putting smile as he declared, “I’m going to crush that kid, the one who looks just like your little bro, and I’m gonna to do it right in front of you. Should give me some entertainment at least.”
The mental image made Louise shudder. “Y-you…really are complete human garbage. This is exactly why I hate you.”
Serge’s expression sobered. “Oh yeah? Well, not like I give a crap. They’re coming after you, so I’m just here to wait for ’em.”
“And what about everyone else?” Louise asked. Her intention was to nudge him into leaving guard duty to one of the others, but sadly, they were all otherwise preoccupied.
“They took the troops on board and went to pay a visit to our intruders. Figured I could leave the small fries to them.” Serge plopped down on a chair and leaned back.
Louise closed her eyes. Leon, please don’t bother me. I am begging you. Don’t do anything dangerous.

***

“Ah, it’s you!” I gasped.
“Eeeeek!”
After annihilating all the people who had come to face me, I spotted a soldier on the ground who looked familiar. He was one of the men who’d boarded the *Einhorn* when I first came to the republic, claiming it was an “inspection.” He’d looked down his nose at me and taken a real shitty tone. I shot him with a rubber bullet, and as he writhed on the floor in agony, I stomped over and slammed my foot down on his gut.
“I was so hoping to see you again! I’ve been anxious to show my gratitude for your stellar treatment upon my arrival.”

“N-noooo! Somebody save meeee!”
“What’s this? I thought you were a captain, but now you’re only a commander? I’m so curious, what could possibly have earned you such a demotion? Why don’t you tell me, hm?” I aimed the barrel of my gun at his head. He was so overcome with fear that he started foaming at the mouth and passed out. “Aw, we were only getting started. Oh well. I’m busy, so it’s not like I have time to waste on you.”
If Luxion were here, he would probably say something like, “In that case, why did you bother threatening him at all? You only wasted more time that way.”
Ugh! For some reason, I kinda miss the never-ending sarcasm parade.
“I really need to look for Miss Louise, but I wonder if those idiots are doing all right? Guess I shouldn’t worry too much. They’re like cockroaches; you couldn’t kill them if you tried.”
Nevertheless, I couldn’t help worrying about those bozos.

***

“Here we go! Take this!” Greg howled as he hefted his machine gun, bravely firing at the enemy. With a belt of ammunition hanging from one shoulder, he looked like a movie star, taking down each enemy as they charged toward him.
Jilk was unimpressed, eyeing his companion coldly. They had rendezvoused and were supposed to be fighting together, but Greg was almost entirely naked.
“Greg, don’t you feel ashamed, looking like that?” Jilk was using a sniper rifle with a scope attached. However, since Greg was mowing down the path ahead, most of what he saw through that scope was a close-up of Greg’s rear end. His trigger finger itched something fierce.
“Yeah, sorry ’bout this. I am kinda embarrassed.”
“Then please put some clothes on.” Jilk’s momentary relief was short-lived.
“I don’t have nearly enough muscles on my back yet.”
Jilk was at a loss for words.
D-does he seriously think his lack of muscles is more shameful than nudity? Is he actually that stupid?!
Jilk paused and stared up at the ceiling, his thoughts wandering to the members of the group who weren’t currently with them.
I hope at least Chris…no, he’s beyond salvation. Even Brad can’t be considered sane anymore. I wish I could have accompanied His Highness instead. Honestly, why did things have to turn out like this?
Since all the enemies in the area had been wiped out, Greg started to move on. “Hey, Jilk, how long are you gonna stare into space? Get your head on straight, would you? This is a battlefield. Seriously, guys like you are hopeless; no common sense.”

Jilk's finger moved to the trigger. Surely no one could blame me for firing on him from behind, could they?

***

At about the same time, Chris and Brad also rendezvoused and began wiping out enemy soldiers. The former was clad only in his trademark loincloth as he brandished his wooden sword, taking out soldier after soldier.

The enemy troops screamed, "Urgh! This guy is dressed like a clown, but he's so strong!"

"This is hardly the garb of a clown!" Chris protested, bringing his sword slamming down on the man who'd mocked him, thereby rendering him unconscious.

Brad slowly followed him from behind with a group of men in ostentatious armor trailing at his rear, orchestra equipment in hand.

The moment the enemy spotted them, they began their retreat, realizing victory was beyond their capabilities.

"There's too many! Call for reinforcements!"

"This must be the main unit!"

"Dammit! Stupid kingdom barbarians!"

Brad watched them scramble away and sighed. In the same instant, the troops behind him disappeared with a poof. "What a shame. I was about to begin my performance, but this audience doesn't seem to have any patience. Oh, Chris, nicely done on the opening act."

Brad's flippant attitude prompted Chris to bash him over the head with his wooden sword.

"Ouch! Wh-what was that for?!" Brad demanded.

"Stop making me do all the fighting and pitch in."

Brad shook his head. "You really don't get it, do you? The lead actor must always arrive fashionably late."

"And since when have you been the lead? It's blindingly obvious that Bartfort holds that role. He suggested we do this to begin with, and the person we're rescuing is *his* acquaintance. From where I'm standing, you're nothing more than a side character."

Brad frowned. "I-I'm the lead actor of my own story. That means I'm always the protagonist."

"Yeah? How wonderful for you. Now hurry up and get a move on. It'll be a pain if those men come back with reinforcements."

"Hey, wait up!"

As Chris barreled on ahead, Brad hurried after him.

***

“Grr! I didn’t think I would be left behind to watch the ship.” Julius mumbled from within his cockpit as he guarded the *Einhorn*. Everyone else had infiltrated the enemy vessel while he’d been left outside to keep watch. He was vexed; he wanted to fight.

“Julius, make sure to keep a close eye out!” Marie commanded from the *Einhorn*’s bridge. Angelica, Olivia, and Noelle were there with her as well. They were also accompanied by Kyle and Carla—the whole gang was here.

Julius exhaled. “Well, when I think about how important it is to protect Marie, I don’t resent being left behind so much.” Although he’d been muttering complaints up until now, Marie’s voice coaxed some motivation out of him. “And it looks like the enemy has come.”

Armors bearing the House Barielle flag approached the *Einhorn*. There were other armed troops without suits that were trying to board and infiltrate the *Einhorn* as well.

“As if I’d let you get past me!” Julius bellowed, firing a warning shot. The boarding troops paused, but the Armors went on the attack.

Julius dodged out of the way, pulling out his sword. He sliced right through an enemy suit’s legs, severing them as if cutting through butter. The enemy lost their balance, slamming into one of their own ships. After that, they were motionless.

“This Armor is incredible. So this is the power Bartfort holds in his hands?” Julius had faced Leon in a duel, but he had never before realized his opponent’s lethality in battle. That was a terrifying thought in and of itself, but he also realized Leon had held back against them, which was sobering in the worst way. It was infuriating, but at the same time, Julius realized that however tactless Leon had been, he’d shown consideration in not risking their lives. It was hard to believe someone as annoying as Leon had been looking out for them.

“If I can’t fulfill my role after borrowing an Armor this strong, Leon won’t let me hear the end of it. That’s one thing I can’t stomach.”

Imagining Leon’s snicker motivated Julius all the more.

When the next opponent flew in, Julius cleaved right through their arms, leaving them incapacitated. In the face of others who threatened to follow, he shouted, “If you have a death wish, feel free to come at me!”

A single Armor drifted forward. “In that case, you can face me.” The voice belonged to Loic. He charged straight at Julius.

Julius dodged out of his trajectory. “Are you trying to throw your life away?!”

Loic maneuvered like a suicidal maniac, making it difficult for Julius, who on principle tried his best to avoid taking lives as long as he could help it. Loic, however, had nothing to lose.

“I’ve heard your voice,” Loic said. “Aren’t you…the kingdom’s prince?”

“And what of it?” Julius asked.

“Nothing. I just realized something is all. If you want Louise that bad, you’ll have to kill me first!”

“Tch!”
Beating Loic would be easy enough, but if Julius wasn’t careful when he aimed his attacks, Loic would die. This battle was becoming difficult.

***

On board the ship where Louise was kept, Hughes led a group of Druille soldiers and knights.
“Hurry up and take them down!” he snapped at his men.
“W-we’re trying! B-but the enemy is too strong.”
Hughes found himself facing the combined power of Greg and Jilk. The former, who was mostly naked and carrying a machine gun, was hiding behind a corner as he discussed tactics with his companion.
“Jilk, I’m counting on you to cover me from behind.”
“You’re going to charge in there naked? Did you hit your head or something?”
Greg pulled a device out from his shorts and showed it to Jilk. “As long as I have this, naked or not, the bullets shouldn’t hit me. That’s what Luxion said, anyhow.”
“Where did you just pull that thing from? Please keep it away from me.”
Greg stuffed the device back into his shorts and held his machine gun at the ready. “Jilk, I’m trusting you to watch my back. I’m going in!” As he charged, the enemy was thrown into disarray.
“Why is he naked?!”
“I-It’s no good! Our bullets aren’t hitting him!”
“Then I’ll use my magi—bwah!” No sooner had one of the knights tried to cast a spell than Jilk sniped them from afar.
After seeing one of his men taken out by a rubber bullet, Hughes threw his right hand up. “Do you savages from the kingdom truly think you can—”
“Eat this!” Greg had accumulated enough experience to realize the Sacred Tree’s divine protection would be nothing but trouble, which was precisely why he’d prepared a counter for it. He slammed his foot into Hughes, sending the man reeling through the air.
“H-how dare—” Hughes struggled back to his feet, but Greg’s gun was already trained on his forehead.
“Checkmate. Simplest way to combat your Sacred Tree’s power is to take you out before you can use it. Piece of cake.” Greg spoke as if he was clever for spotting their weakness, but it was really a pretty brute force solution.
Jilk approached from behind and took out a handgun, firing it at Hughes.
“Yeoooooowch!” Hughes held his hands over his injured face and thrashed on the floor.
Jilk watched dispassionately, taking out a pair of handcuffs. “What are you doing, bragging to the enemy? You’ve no reason to monologue; you should have just shot him. Now hurry up and restrain him.”

Luxion had prepared the cuffs beforehand, and they wouldn't break easily. Even someone bearing a crest from one of the Six Great Houses wouldn't escape.
Hughes continued to resist even after his arms were tied and his cheek was swelling an ugly red. "You don't know who you're messing with! Only a complete fool would do something like this. I don't know if your purpose is really saving Louise, but if you do, the republic won't stand for it. And I won't forget your faces. I'll ensure you pay!"
Greg and Jilk exchanged glances, laughing.
"Hear that?" Greg motioned over his shoulder with a thumb. "He's got a point. Bartfort really hasn't thought this through, has he?"
"Well, he *is* an idiot. Both in a good way and in a bad way. Which is precisely why it would be pointless to listen to whatever threats this fellow may have in mind—assuming he really has any."
They left Hughes behind and started forward.
"H-hey! Wait just a minute! Are you really going to leave me tied up here? I-I'm a man of the Six Great Houses, you know! My name is Hughes! Haven't you heard of me?!"
Greg glanced at him. "Like we give a crap. If you really wanna introduce yourself that bad, save it for later. Though if we're doing this, the name's Greg."
"And mine is Jilk." Jilk gave a slight wave. "I hope we can share some tea in the future."
Hughes was dumbfounded. "Wh-what…?"

***

As I took down enemy after enemy and proceeded down a corridor, I spotted a young man in front of me. I lifted my gun and pointed it at him, but he smiled bitterly and lifted both hands in defeat.
"I surrender," he said.
"That was a little too easy. You planning something?"
I recognized him as Emile. I'd seen him a number of times, but this was our first time actually speaking to each other.
Embarrassed, Emile scratched his cheek. "I'm not so fond of scary or painful things, see. I already ordered Pleven's men to fall back. If you're looking for Louise, you'll find her this way."
It didn't seem like he was lying. I lowered my weapon, still wary as I tried to slip past him.
"I don't see the Raults' troops anywhere," he said. "The Raults were the only ones who didn't deploy their Armors either. Could it be you're colluding?"
I paused and glanced at Emile, smiling. From that, he surmised my answer, and his face lit up.

“I knew it! The timing of your attack, the positioning, it all seemed so suspicious. I was certain someone had to be feeding you information.”
It was true that the Raults were providing support. They’d been more than happy to do so, in fact.
“It’d be wiser not to run your mouth in front of the enemy,” I said. “Can’t blame me if you get yourself killed.”
“You wouldn’t do something like that. Moreover, Serge is up ahead waiting for you. Take my word for it, he’s a strong opponent.”
“Something to look forward to then! The most fulfilling thing in the world is knocking cocky guys down a peg. Even so, he’s just icing on the cake. My real objective is to rescue Miss Louise.”
Not long after parting with Emile, I spotted a door up ahead.

***

Serge lifted himself out of his seat and began stretching. Meanwhile, Louise’s maids squealed every time the ship rocked as the battle raged outside. Announcements played over the intercom system, alerting those on board that the intruders had breached sector after sector. Louise knew they would soon reach her room, whether she liked it or not.
As the maids sobbed, footsteps echoed outside the door.
Serge reached for his handgun. “You lot, stay out of this.” In the next instant, he pulled the trigger and unloaded on the door. The shots echoed through the room, empty shells clattering to the floor. A tendril of smoke rose from the barrel of Serge’s gun. He threw it aside and picked up his spear. “Come on out.”
The door was riddled with bullet holes, and the intruder kicked it down before entering. He carried a machine gun in his hands.
“I’ve come to play,” Leon said with an enormous grin. He turned his gun on Serge and fired.
Guns that could rapidly fire so many rounds were nonstandard in the republic, which made the weapon all the more terrifying. Serge, however, threw his hand out and created a magical barrier. It repelled the rubber bullets, which bounced uselessly to the ground.
Serge glanced at them and scoffed, “You’re too soft. At least bring some real ammunition to the fight. I came here ready to take you down, no holds barred.” Leon’s choice of nonlethal rounds was disappointing, to say the least.
Leon discarded his gun in favor of unsheathing his sword. “Perfect. I love crushing insufferable jerks like you! I hated your guts from the moment I saw your ugly mug.” He played the villain role well as he charged forward, swinging his blade.
The corner of Serge’s lips curled as he parried the blow. “Your attacks have no power. I thought you kingdom boys were supposed to be made of

tougher…stuff!” He punctuated his words with a kick, sending Leon flailing backward.
Leon rolled across the floor, skillfully curling his body in such a way that he could quickly leap to his feet. Once he was up, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.
Serge had engaged him long enough to evaluate his skill level. “Not terrible, but there’s no way you can win.”
Leon’s expression soured.

***

Meanwhile, the troops Narcisse led were engaging Chris and Brad. As Brad took aim, Narcisse threw both hands up in the air, surrendering.
“What? No fight left in you, huh?” Brad wrinkled his forehead, puzzled.
“To tell the truth,” Narcisse said, “Louise is both an acquaintance and a former pupil, so I’m not keen on sacrificing her in the first place. Part of me was relieved when you guys showed up to steal her away.”
Brad lowered his gun. “Guess there’s some common sense among you Six Great Houses fellows after all, then. That’s a relief. I assumed you were all like Pierre.”
“Pierre is one of a kind. That said, if you plan to continue farther in, I would advise you to be cautious.”
Chris glared. “You think we would be caught unawares?”
“I know you’re strong, but you don’t understand—Serge is terrifying.”
“Terrifying, you say?”
Narcisse had ventured into a dungeon with Leon and the Holfort boys once before. He had seen their power first-hand, but in his opinion, Serge was in an entirely different league.
“Serge is unbelievably powerful. A few years ago, he managed to beat a monster with his bare hands without using the Sacred Tree’s divine protection. It was no small beast either. It stood a full two meters tall.”
If this had been a few years ago, Serge had been about fifteen at the time. If he really had beat a monster with his bare fists at that age, then he was surely an even more dangerous opponent now.
Brad, however, was not impressed. “How inspiring. Hey, Chris, do you have some handcuffs on you?”
“I do.”
Chris slipped them out from his loincloth, prompting Brad to pull a face.
“Why would you keep them *there* of all places? I don’t even want to touch them now. You’re going to have to handle this.”
Chris shook his head. “I suppose I have no choice. The downside of this loincloth is that it doesn’t have any pockets. It’s completely perfect in all other ways… Hm? Looks like Bartfort is close to our target.” The device attached to his ear fed him this information.

Since neither boy cared to heed Narcisse's warning, he grew indignant. "Will you listen to me?! I'm telling you, Serge is guarding Louise. And he's really, *really* strong! No… No, 'strong' doesn't do him justice. Your chances against him are abysmal. But if you don't get in there and do something, Leon's a dead man."
Brad stared at him and sighed. "You're Narcisse, right? You're totally clueless."
"Huh?"
Chris slapped the cuffs on Narcisse, and the latter tried his best to ignore how strangely warm they were. Best not to give it too much thought, he reasoned.
Chris said, "I have no clue what strange ideas you're entertaining, but Bartfort is a genuine hero. He would never lose to brute strength alone. The fact that sheer power can't overwhelm him is exactly what makes him such a pain to fight."
Brad nodded in agreement. "You said it. He'll likely beat that poor Serge guy bloody. Bartfort hates his sort more than anything. And you know what else? Of all the people in the world, Bartfort's the last one I'd ever want to face in a serious fight."
"I feel the same. A match would be doable, but if we were in actual battle, I would do everything I could to run away."
As Narcisse listened to them avow their trust in Leon's abilities, he found himself wondering, *Are they on good terms with Leon? Or do they actually hate him?*

***

At around the same time that Leon reached Louise's room, Julius was locked in battle with Loic outside.
"Does he seriously have a death wish?!" Julius was feeling the pressure. Loic charged toward Julius for a tackle, but Julius dodged out of the way and used that opening to break Loic's left arm. Loic's Armor was barely holding together, and he had no weapon to fight with either. Julius was doing his best not to kill Loic, which was why he had yet to land a finishing blow.
"It's hard holding back," Julius muttered. "Your name is Loic, right? If you keep this up, you'll end up killing yourself!"
Julius said this for Loic's benefit, but the other man seemed unbothered.
"What of it?"
"Sorry?"
"I'm basically a dead man anyway. I have nothing left to live for. Not a single damn thing!" Loic roared as he charged again.
Julius caught Loic and threw him down onto the *Einhorn*'s deck. There, he grabbed the enemy's cockpit hatch and pried it open, revealing Loic inside, his eyes bloodshot. The last time Julius had seen Loic, he'd looked like a

proper nobleman, but now he was a shadow of his former self. His eyes were sharper, but his cheeks were hollow. He'd lost a considerable amount of weight as well; his life had evidently been far rougher since the scandal.
Loic managed to climb out of his cockpit, wielding a sword. He took a stance against Julius, even though the latter was still in his Armor.
"Y-you fool!"
"I told you, I have nothing," Loic said. "My family told me to die on this mission. I have nowhere left to go."
Julius could easily picture Loic's straits. His family wanted him gone. It was hard seeing him in this state. He cracked open the hatch to his own cockpit, grabbing a sword as he hopped out.
If he finds it too shameful to keep on living, then I suppose I'll have to end it for him.
Julius's actions weren't motivated by hate; he actually sympathized with Loic and only thought ending Loic's life would be the kindest thing he could do.
When Julius left his Armor, Loic's face brightened—he realized Julius had resolved to fight him to the death.
"You have my thanks, prince of the kingdom, for giving me a place to die. I'm grateful that you've given my final moments some meaning."
Until this point, Loic had been unable to take his life and unable to find anyone willing to do it for him. He hung in limbo, waiting for his family to dispose of him. Finally, this battle had granted him purpose.
"I'll end it for you," Julius said.
Both men readied their weapons.
Then Noelle ran out from the bridge. She huffed and puffed as she stumbled outside. Her pace slowed, but she was intent on stopping this fight.
"Noelle, go back inside!" Julius commanded even as she made her way over to him.
As Loic's eyes landed on her, his face contorted. He focused his gaze on Julius instead. "Noelle! I… I really did love you. That's the honest truth."
"Loic, enough of this. There's no reason to go this far. I don't want to see Louise sacrifice her life. I don't want her to die! But the same goes for you. There's no reason for you to die!"
"I'm dead already! My life is hollow. Meaningless." Tears welled in Loic's eyes as he dropped his gaze, lowering his sword as well. "No one cares for a noble who has lost the Sacred Tree's protection. My life is worthless. The clock is ticking; I'll be killed sooner or later, my death passed off as illness. I'd rather end it in battle." If Loic's life was forfeit, he at least hoped for a meaningful death.
Julius continued holding his sword at the ready, but he made no move to attack, affording the pair time to say what needed to be said.
"Then just leave this place!" Noelle reasoned. "You can live without the tree's protection. You don't have to be Loic of the Six Great Houses. You can just be normal, ordinary Loic."

Loic continued crying as he laughed. “That’s not it. That’s not it at all.”
“Loic?”
“For so long, I claimed that I loved you, but I was completely ignorant. I didn’t even try to open my eyes! I shackled you to me and made you suffer. *Hurt* you. That’s why my life is worthless now.”
Loic yearned for death because of the scars he’d left on Noelle’s heart. After their separation, he’d finally been able to take an objective look at himself. He discarded his blade and threw his arms wide open. “Prince Julius, I honestly don’t have an ounce of fight left in me. I know it’s selfish to ask this, but please end it in one swing.”
Julius adjusted his grip on the hilt of his sword and retook his stance. “Very well. Do you have any last words?”
Loic smiled, looking genuinely at peace. “Noelle, I’m so sorry. I know I’ve caused you trouble as well, Your Highness. I only wish I could apologize to the earl too. Make sure to tell him I’m sorry.”
“I will make sure he receives your message.” Julius lunged forward, lifting his sword. Before he could bring it down, a figure came flying at Loic from the side.

“I’ve had just about enough of your crap, you spoiled brat!”
Loic tumbled across the deck, hacking and coughing all the way. Julius froze in place and lowered his weapon.
“Marie? Uh, um… I thought we were going to grant Loic’s wish?” Her sudden entrance had left Julius puzzled.
Noelle was similarly gobsmacked. “Um, Rie? Uh… Loic just went flying…?” She’d never imagined Marie’s fists could pack such power since she was so petite, but Julius knew better; he’d experienced her blows first-hand.
Marie’s fist is about as heavy as a giant boulder.
No joke. She really could send someone twice her size reeling with a single punch.
Marie cracked her knuckles and stomped toward Loic. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, she yanked him up and slapped him across the face and then, for good measure, backhanded him as well.
“I-I’m sorry… Please, no more…” Loic pleaded as Marie continued whaling on him. Both of his cheeks were swollen.
Marie paused to compose herself before leaning in, bringing her face close to his. “What’s this crap I hear about wanting to die, huh? You think life isn’t worth living? Sure, you might have a broken heart, but you think that gives you license to act like the heroine of some tragedy? You disgust me.”
“B-buht I…” Loic tried to speak, but his face was so swollen that the words didn’t come out right. Marie’s glare silenced him before he could get anywhere with his excuses. Her intensity was overwhelming.
“See? This is exactly why Noelle didn’t want to be with you. If your first love was a flop, you search for the next. Did you seriously plan to cling to your heartbreak and throw away your life like a little baby? Are you trying to make fools out of us? Huh?!”
“Eep!”
Marie gave the trembling boy a shove, letting him tumble across the deck.
“There are people out there who desperately want to live whose lives are cruelly ripped away,” she chided. “If you actually died for something this ridiculous, I’d curse you to your grave.”
“B-but—”
“No ‘buts’! Now you listen to me. From the moment you’re born into this world, you have to keep fighting to stay alive. You’ve got plenty going for you: you’re young, healthy, and fit. But you still want to die because your first love turned you down? Quit acting like a baby! What, you think people would see you in a better light if you died here? Do you have any brain cells to rub together?”
As much as Marie laid into him, her eyes were dead serious. Even Julius found something convincing in her argument.
But why is she trying to persuade him to keep living?
Marie had no connection to Loic, at least as far as Julius knew. Maybe she simply couldn’t stand to see a self-destructive spiral this pronounced.

“You know what’ll actually make you look good? Staying alive ’til the very end. The coolest people in the world are those who fight tooth and nail to keep living and survive. Right now, you just look like a pathetic, spoiled brat. There’s nothing attractive about you. I can see why Noelle hates your guts.”

Loic’s eyes fell to the ground. “How could you ever understand? As a noble, I’ve lost everything. What could you know about wanting to die?”

“Nothing! But you’re sure arrogant, wanting other people to sympathize with you when you’ve never once stopped to consider Noelle’s feelings. If you’re really a man, then pick yourself up and crawl out of the pit you’ve fallen into. You keep mentioning how you lost the Sacred Tree’s divine protection, but, hello? None of us had it to begin with, and we’re still alive. As for me? I don’t have any noble status either. All I’ve got is a bunch of debt.” Marie reached down and grabbed Loic, forcing him to his feet. She gave his stomach a light smack. “Anyone who says they’re willing to give up their life that easily is a weakling. Those who are really at the bottom of the barrel don’t have the luxury of choosing how they live. Before you start spouting off that kinda crap, give living a fighting chance. You still have plenty of time to start over, however many times it takes.”

“R-right.” Loic continued sobbing, and Marie wrapped her arms around him.

Julius, who had listened to the entire exchange, didn’t think it would be so simple for Loic to turn things around. But since Marie seemed to have convinced him, Julius couldn’t very well cut in with his jaded opinion. He returned to the cockpit of his Armor and scanned the area.

So the republic fleet isn’t going to attack the Einhorn, huh? Is it because they’re terrified of Bartfort? Or is it because Bartfort holds the Guardian’s Crest?

Since the *Einhorn* was flying a pirate flag, Julius and the crew could hardly complain if they were attacked. Yet, for whatever reason, Fernand wasn’t sending his ships on the offensive.

All that’s left now, I guess, is for Bartfort to extract Louise.

Chapter 10:
Manipulator

“GAH!”
After Serge slammed the butt of his spear into my stomach, I found myself curled up on the ground, vomiting. Guilty as I felt for dirtying the room where Miss Louise was staying, I didn’t have the luxury of worrying about hygiene. While I was battered and bruised, Serge looked none the worse for wear, as if the fight had just started. Simply put, none of my attacks had found their mark.
“How the heck do you even get that strong?” I muttered.
Serge certainly was powerful. *Very* powerful. I’d heard beforehand that he’d trained as an adventurer, but I hadn’t dreamed it was to this extent.
As I struggled to recover, Serge slammed his foot into me. His attacks were as merciless as his personality.
“Is this all you’ve got? Where’s the hero I heard so much about? Is this really the Scumbag Knight? Your only power comes from that Lost Item. Without it, you’re nothing.”
He slammed his foot down on me, and I had to grit my teeth. Blood trickled down my chin. I peeled myself off the floor and wiped it away. I thought he’d wear himself out with the constant onslaught, but Serge was still raring to go.
“Haaah… Haaah…” I wheezed. “You sure do have some fight in you.”
Normally, it would sap a person’s stamina to pummel me as continuously as he’d been doing, but seeing as how he wasn’t even close to panting, I sensed something amiss.
Serge eyed me as I swayed. He pulled something from his pocket—a small bottle filled with liquid. He chugged it before discarding the empty vial.
“Drugs, eh?”
“Body enhancers. This way I can keep beating on you.” Serge glanced at Miss Louise. He was speaking more for her benefit than mine.
Miss Louise was surrounded by her maids. Her face was pale as she shook her head. “N-no. Please, stop this.”
Serge threw his arms open. “The fun’s just getting started! You’re gonna have a front row seat when he starts throwing up blood, and you’ll get to watch as he dies miserably, innards leaking everywhere.”
That’s a bit extreme. But I’m more concerned about those drugs. Marie mentioned them in her journal. They give the user a temporary strength boost. Pretty standard game item.
“So you even brought steroids to this fight,” I said.
“No rules in a death match.”

I agreed with him there—not that I had the chance to do so, given his hulked-up fist swinging at me, which sent me flying. My back slammed into a wall, which cracked on impact.
“Urgh!” Blood sprayed past my lips.
Miss Louise shoved her maids away and scrambled to me, standing protectively in front of me with her arms thrown wide.
Serge narrowed his eyes. “What do you think you’re doing?”
“I can’t let this go on. Don’t hurt Leon any more than you already have.”
“He started this!”
“It doesn’t matter! I want you to stop!”
Serge took a stance with his spear, and the maids shouted at him, “Lord Serge! Lady Louise must still fulfill her role! We were ordered to take her to the top of the tree unharmed!”
He lowered his weapon, regarding me coldly. “I’m disappointed in you. I thought you’d put up more of a fight.”
I was still wincing in pain when Miss Louise helped me to my feet. We started out of the room together, which prompted her maids to stop us. Miss Louise snapped at them, “Stay back! I’m not going to run away, not after I’ve come this far. But if we stay, Serge is likely to kill Leon. I’m just taking him somewhere safe, and then I’ll come right back.” She lent me her shoulder, and I managed to hobble out of the room.

***

Louise supported Leon on her shoulder as they entered the corridor. Her tears wouldn’t stop. Seeing Serge beat on a man identical to her dead brother filled her with a sadness that words couldn’t express.
“You really are an idiot!” she scolded him.
“Ah ha ha. Sorry.”
Before leaving her family’s estate, Louise’s father had told her Leon’s message—an apology. She hadn’t understood what he meant, but she did now.
“So this is what you meant to say,” she said.
“Are you angry with me?”
“Of course I am! You’ve stirred up an incredible mess. I’ll beg for clemency on your behalf before I die, but I have no idea how things will turn out.”
Louise still fully intended to sacrifice herself, but she was willing to lend what support she could. She just had no way of knowing whether it would help once she was gone.
“There’s no reason for you to push yourself like this,” she continued. “I chose this path. I told you before, I am content to be a sacrifice. I *want* to go to Leon’s side.”
In truth, Louise was scared. Some part of her wanted someone to save her. At the same time, Louise couldn’t endure the nightmares she’d had every night of her suffering brother. She’d convinced herself that he wouldn’t be

lonely if she were by his side. It was a way to repay him for being helpless in the face of his death all those years ago. She had resolved herself.
To her surprise, Leon said, “You always have been a stickler when it comes to duty, even when you were younger.”
“Huh?” Louise was puzzled. Leon spoke as if he’d known her back then, even though they’d only met recently. She wasn’t able to respond, though; her insomnia had left her sleep-deprived, which had affected her judgment.
“I planned to fulfill our promise to attend the New Year’s Festival together and then disappear, but the stupid Sacred Tree got in my way and messed things up.”
“Wh-what are you talking about?”
“It’s me. I mean, I’m *your* Leon. Didn’t you realize?”
“St-stop with the jokes! That’s not funny!”
Leon spoke as though he were actually her dead brother, but that was impossible. At least, Louise wanted it to be.
Leon put a hand over his stomach, wincing even as he forced a smile. It made her heart ache. “A long…long time ago, when we slept in the same bed, I pinned the blame on you when I wet the bed. Remember? You got so pissed you wouldn’t speak to me for a week.”
Louise had never told the other Leon that story. “H-how could you know about that?”
“I wanted to apologize, so I made a paper ring and gave it to you as a gift. You only forgave me after I admitted it was me in front of everyone and apologized.”
He got so carried away after she finally caved that he claimed the ring was a symbol of their promise to one day marry. It was a pretty embarrassing memory for them both, so she tried not to bring it up.
The tears came out faster. “Why… Why are you only telling me this now?!”
Leon wrapped Louise in his arms and softly explained, “It’d only cause problems for you if I showed up out of nowhere, having reincarnated into a new body. I was fine with just poking my head in. I wanted to see everyone again.”
“You should have told me! For so long, I…I’ve wanted to apologize to you!”
Louise sobbed into Leon’s chest. She wanted to say more, but the words wouldn’t come out. She was now convinced her initial intuition about Leon was right, and she fully believed he was the reincarnation of her little brother. She ignored the inconsistencies, instead focusing on what she wanted to be true.
“I knew you’d bawl like this, so I didn’t want to say anything. I don’t bear you any grudge. I told you that at the end, didn’t I?”
Louise nodded, remembering Leon’s final hours. She had been unable to do anything but watch as he suffered.
“Do you seriously think I’d want you to sacrifice yourself for me? I was smiling at you at the end, wasn’t I?”
“Yes. Yes, you were.”

***

As death closed in on Louise's little brother, famous doctors were crowded into his room, eyes glued to the floor. None of them had been able to help, even as Albergue begged for salvation.
"I'll give you whatever you want! So please, save my son! You're renowned experts—I hear you can even bring the dead back to life!"
One of the doctors shook his head. "The dead cannot be resurrected. That's an exaggerated rumor. While I do think your son's condition is a shame, I cannot discern the cause. I cannot even begin to guess why his body has deteriorated in this way. It's almost like his soul is fighting to leave his flesh."
As strange as it sounded, Leon wasn't afflicted by any sort of sickness; his body was languishing for no discernible reason. That was why none of the doctors could do anything for him.
"A shaman said the same thing! If that's true, then help us pin his soul in place!"
Naturally, Albergue had gathered experts in that particular field as well, but every single person had thrown up their hands.
"We're doctors, not shamans."
Albergue clenched his fists so hard that his nails dug into the soft skin of his palms, making blood drip from them.
Louise clasped one of Leon's hands in hers. "You can't die on me, you hear? We made promises, so many of them. I'll never let you live it down if you break them and leave me. You're going to be the Guardian, remember? And we're going to get married, right?"
Leon smiled at her through the pain, which only made her heart ache more. "Sorry. I will keep my promise to you. When you're in trouble, I swear…I'll jump in…to save you." The pain flared, and he couldn't continue.
Louise shook her head and threw her arms around him. Like a child, she clung desperately to him, as if that might root his soul in place.
"Don't leave me! Don't leave your sister behind!"
Leon died that same day.

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"I'd never want you to sacrifice yourself," said Leon.
Louise shook her head. "But then…why can I hear your voice? You've been screaming at me to save you!"
"Flowers don't bloom from the Sacred Tree. There has to be some explanation behind all of this."
"What do you mean?"
"I'm looking into it. That's why I need you to trust me and come along until I know for sure."

Before Louise realized what was happening, Leon had tugged her outside to the deck, where Arroganz waited. Soldiers and Armors lay collapsed all around it.
Leon turned to face Louise. “I’m sorry for everything up until now, but I swear we’ll be together forever from now on.”
She threw her arms around him, clinging.
Their moment was short-lived as the deck shook violently.
“Whoa!” Leon cried out in surprise.
Louise glanced around and realized they were rising in altitude. “It’s floating upward?”
The vessel had been suspended in the air ever since the *Einhorn* rammed it, but now it was moving again.
Leon wrapped his arms tightly around Louise and tried to climb into Arroganz. “Come, this way.”
“W-wait! Something strange is going on here.”

***

Serge sprinted down one of the ship’s corridors. “That woman… She betrayed us at the eleventh hour.” He had been monitoring her and Leon after they left, and now he hurried to the deck in pursuit.
When he arrived, he found Leon and Louise embracing. Something in him snapped. “Hey, hey. You really think you can run away this late in the game?”
Leon stayed silent as Louise answered, “Serge, leave us be.”
Having overheard their whole conversation, he laughed derisively. “You really think your little brother came back to life? What a hopeless idiot. Did you forget this liar was born around the exact same time as your Leon?”
If this Leon really was her brother reincarnated, then it would be odd for them to have been born around the same time. It was an obvious doubt to have, but it shook Louise. “Leon?” she asked, turning to him.
Leon said nothing, and Serge pulled out his handgun.
“Damn impostor. Might be easy to fool Louise since she’s in a weak state of mind, but you aren’t gonna pull the wool over anyone else’s eyes. You’re a fake hero—all talk and no action. And now you’re gonna die.”
“Leon?” Louise called again, her voice desperate. “Tell me one thing. What did you write inside that paper ring? That’s a secret no one knew except you and me. If you really are who you say, you should know what it was, right?!”
It was a question no one else would know the answer to.
“Uh…” Leon cleared his throat, refusing to meet her gaze. “I think it said ‘I love you’?”
Wrong answer. Louise shoved him away, face contorting in disgust. “You tricked me.”

“That’s a shame,” said Leon. “It was going so well.”
The large vessel finally arrived at the top of the Sacred Tree. Louise retreated, putting distance between her and Leon. He tried to yank her back, but Serge aimed a shot at the floor between them, stopping him.
“Don’t move,” he warned. “You just stand there and watch. Look, the Sacred Tree’s flower has finally come into view.”
There was a single white chrysanthemum at the top of the tree, and some hundred thin, rope-like tentacles shot out of it. They slung through the air, searching for Louise. A voice echoed around them.
“Big Sis, where are you? I can’t find you.”
Recognizing the voice as her little brother’s, Louise’s own voice grew hoarse as she answered, “Here. I’m right here! Your big sister is here, Leon!”
The tentacles reacted, shooting toward her. Leon, who had been watching the scene play out, frantically scrambled after Louise to try to stop her, but Serge fired again. This time, he didn’t bother with a warning shot; the bullet found its mark.
“Guh!”
Leon purposefully threw himself in the gun’s trajectory to make sure it didn’t hit Louise, but as a result, he wasn’t able to catch her. She leaped from the deck, and the tentacles caught her, dragging her toward the flower.
“Miss Louise!” Leon cried, hand stretched after her. Realizing it was futile, he turned and glared at Serge.
“We’re going into round two, and no one’s here to save you this time.”
Having emptied his chamber, Serge discarded his gun. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another vial, chugging it before tossing it over his shoulder. Then he grabbed his spear.
Leon started walking leisurely toward Serge. He made no move to reach for a weapon.
“What’s wrong? That weapon at your hip just a dust collector? At least grab something before I—”
“You’re a nuisance. Out of the way.”
“Wha?!”
In the blink of an eye, Leon surged forward, slamming his fist into Serge’s face. Serge collapsed hard onto the deck. It took only a single blow, and he found himself staring up from his back. Leon didn’t bother with him after that; he climbed into Arroganz, where he rendezvoused with Luxion.
“This isn’t our original plan. Were you unable to secure Louise?” asked Luxion.
“It was going great there until the end. Dammit! Can’t believe they had a secret just between the two of them. It’s the other Leon’s fault our plans got so screwed up.”
Serge tried to get to his feet, but Leon had done more damage than he even realized; he couldn’t get his bearings. The drugs he’d taken ensured there

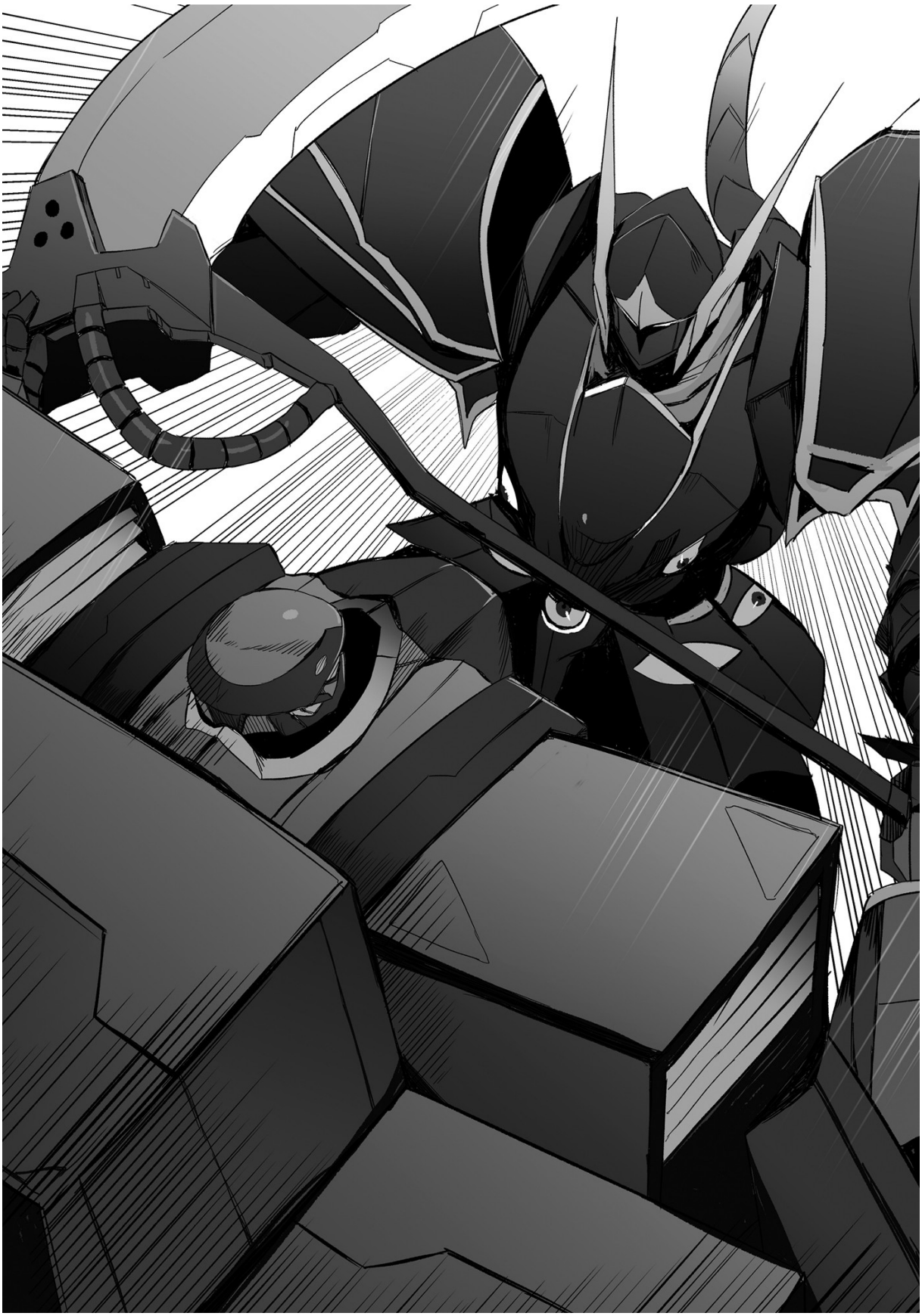
was minimal pain, but his body wouldn't cooperate. Leon didn't even bother glancing back as he slipped into Arroganz's cockpit and left.
Blood spilled out of Serge's nose as he clenched his teeth. "Just gonna pretend I'm not here, huh?! Bastard. So he was just using me!" Leon had purposefully let Serge pummel him. When that realization hit Serge, he trembled with anger. Never before had he tasted such humiliation. All the confidence he'd built began to crumble.

***

I sat safely inside Arroganz's cockpit as we approached the blooming flower at the top of the Sacred Tree. Disgusting tentacles were still sprouting from it.
"Is this thing really part of the Sacred Tree?"
It was a little too gross for my taste. Hundreds of those tentacles wiggled around, refusing to let me close. As if that weren't bad enough, there were columnar devices deployed around the area.
"Luxion, what are those?"
"Defenses that Ideal created. He's also been jamming me this whole time, trying to prevent me from analyzing them."
"I can't believe Serge. He'd really go this far?"
"Well, while it took some time, I did finish the analysis. Normally, I would have destroyed them with my main body's primary cannon, but you failed to convince our target, so we no longer have that option."
"I told you, it was going pretty well there 'til the end!" I snapped. "Anyway, what can you tell me about the flower?"
We'd split up earlier so he could conduct his investigation. Ideal's defense systems had prevented our progress until now, so this had been our first chance to get some answers.
"The flower is unrelated to the Sacred Tree. It is currently connected to it, but it's only siphoning energy."
"So it's something else entirely?" I surmised.
"I detect a Demonic Suit. Not an entire one, mind you, but part of a core that was left behind and possessed the tree."
"You've gotta be kidding me."
The first thing I thought of was the old man I'd fought in our war with the former Principality of Fanoss. He'd almost killed me using that same technology. Demonic Suits were a weapon the new humans had devised to do battle with artificial intelligences like Luxion. To sum it up, they were a huge pain in the ass.
"No, I am not."
"And you're telling me it has Miss Louise in its grasp? Then that means…"
If the Demonic Suit had consumed her, she was beyond saving. There was no way to separate them once they merged, and a human who merged didn't live long.

“No,” said Luxion. “As long as the core is intact, we can save her. It’s fortunate that it is. However, if we don’t act fast, she really will merge completely.”
“Then let’s get her out of there ASAP.”
But why did a Demonic Suit pick Miss Louise in the first place? Why go out of its way to mimic Leon’s voice? He can’t really be trapped inside it, can he?
No, that was impossible. Unless it had managed to suck in his soul somehow? My thoughts were a jumbled mess.
Luxion interrupted, “I believe I understand. The Demonic Suit was seeking someone with the Sacred Tree’s divine protection.”
“It was doing what now?”
“Here it comes.”
The flower rapidly wilted, producing an enormous seed. A crack appeared in it, and an enormous hand shot forth. A black suit, exactly like the one I’d seen before, pried out of the shell.
“Don’t tell me Miss Louise is inside of that thing?”
“She is definitely embedded within it,” Luxion said. “It’s using her as an energy source. Such a despicable creation. Shall I dispose of it?”
“After we rescue Miss Louise.”
I brought Arroganz closer, and the Demonic Suit threw its arms open and used Miss Louise’s voice to declare, “Wonderful. This woman makes for a perfect nucleus. All my energy had long dried up, but now I have an inexhaustible amount to sustain me! I can use it to destroy the entire world!”
I charged toward it, swinging down with my battleaxe. The blade failed so hard to saw through the enemy that it shattered on impact.
“How is that thing so tough?!”
“This is different from the Black Knight. It’s a nearly perfect, full suit. Its power is likewise amplified.”
I gritted my teeth. “You should have said that sooner!” I leaped back, disposing of my broken axe. I grabbed my rifle instead and took aim, but it avoided every single one of my shots. “It’s fast!”
“Of course it is. The old humans struggled immensely against the Demonic Suits. However, from the data I am receiving now, it seems to be at half its original strength.”
“Thanks. I understand now. It’ll be insanely tough to beat this thing and rescue Miss Louise. So? Any bright ideas?” I asked as I dodged the enemy’s incoming fists.
“We remove Louise from the suit and penetrate its core. The main issue is that you failed to convince her earlier. I doubt she will want to leave the suit of her own accord. In fact…”
As the Demonic Suit lunged again, I pulled out a scythe and parried its attack.

“I won’t forgive you. You’re going to pay for tricking me,” Miss Louise hissed, full of hatred. It didn’t sound like the suit was speaking this time.
“She’s conscious in there?!”
I slammed my foot into the suit to put some distance between us, and it threw its arms open again.
“Dammit!”
When I kicked it away, the suit had pierced Arroganz’s leg. I didn’t have to wonder for long how it managed that, since I spotted a tail wagging through the air behind it.
“That thing is dangerous.”
“The entire suit is dangerous. That said…” Luxion trailed off.
Two voices were spilling out of the suit. One was clearly Miss Louise. The other, I assumed, belonged to Leon.
“Ahh, Leon, I feel like we’re finally together again.”
“Big Sis, let’s beat this guy together. He’ll pay for deceiving you.”
“Yes. Let’s do it, Leon.”
The Demonic Suit flew at me again, and I put the pedal to the metal to escape it. I had a solid lead, but even Arroganz’s superior abilities couldn’t keep the enemy at bay; it slowly gained on me.
“This brings back nightmares of facing that old man,” I grumbled.
“Master, now is not the time for jokes. We never planned for a Demonic Suit reviving itself like this. What shall we do?”
As the Demonic Suit chased me, grotesque eyeballs popped up all over it, unleashing magic. The air around it turned bitter cold, and sharp, needle-like icicles began to form. They sailed through the air after me, and no matter how I dodged, they homed in.
“They’re missiles!”
“Engaging the enemy,” said Luxion.



He purged the lid to the container on Arroganz's back, unleashing missiles of his own to destroy the icicles. At the same time, he deployed the drones stored there. Round robots equipped with gatling guns swooped through the air, shooting down any remaining projectiles. Arroganz fired bullets of its own.
The Demonic Suit countered with more magic, and the air filled with explosions and deflected spells. This was turning into a flashy battle.
"Well, now what am I gonna do?" I wondered, continuing to employ evasive maneuvers while I tried to figure out how to save Miss Louise.

***

Marie had witnessed the events from beginning to end as she stood on the *Einhorn*'s bridge, and even now, she watched as the battle unfolded.
The sight of the enemy reminded Angie of the Black Knight. "Why is one of those things here?! What in the world is going on?"
Livia clasped her hands, worried. "Do you think Mr. Leon will be all right?"
"He was able to defeat the Black Knight, but we have no idea what this enemy is capable of. It's impossible to say."
"Oh no!"
Jilk, Brad, Greg, and Chris floated around the *Einhorn* in their own Armors. Julius had retired to the bridge to keep tabs on Loic.
"Is that flower thing on the Sacred Tree normal?" Marie asked Loic.
"No, not as far as I know." Loic's voice started casual, but he quickly corrected his tone, sounding more polite when he said, "I mean, no, ma'am. It's not normal. At least, I've never heard of anything like it before. There is no recorded instance of a flower blooming on the tree."
"Then why are you going so far as to offer it a human sacrifice?"
"The decision was made by the heads of the Six Great Houses. After losing repeatedly to Earl Bartfort, I think they are terrified that the Sacred Tree might abandon them."
Julius pulled a face. "So Bartfort is the catalyst."
"I disagree. Sooner or later, I'm sure they would have offered someone. The will of the Sacred Tree is absolute in the Alzer Republic. Especially if it speaks so that everyone can hear it. In such a case, more people are likely to believe in it and its demands."
Marie held her head in her hands. If Louise dies on us, Albergue will become the final boss! I definitely don't wanna face that! We came all this way. You can't tell me it was all meaningless, or—huh, Noelle?
Noelle stood there with the sapling in her arms, watching the battlefield outside. The crest on the back of her right hand glowed faintly.
Julius was also keeping an eye on the situation. He was chagrined to be unable to go out and help. "I wish we could do something, but we'd probably just get in the way." After all, the Armors he and his friends were

using were all lesser copies of Arroganz. Meaning, if Arroganz was struggling, they didn't stand a chance.
"Julius, don't say that. You have to help him!" Marie pleaded. "Even with Arroganz, Leon can't beat that thing, can he? But you guys are way more skilled when it comes to piloting, I know it. I'm sure you can cover for your Armor's weakness with your technique."
"You're mistaken," Angie said.
"Wh-what do you mean?!"
"Leon *is* strong. He's only struggling because his enemy has taken Louise hostage. If only we could rectify that problem, then Leon would be able to —"
Before she could finish her sentence, Noelle interjected, "Let me do it."
Marie's eyes flew to Noelle. Now the Sacred Tree Sapling was glowing as well. "What? Noelle, what are you—"
"If you wanna pull Louise out of there, we're gonna have to convince her first," Noelle said. "But if things keep up like this, we won't even be able to talk to her. That's where I come in. If I can get close, my voice will reach her."
"Y-you're sure about that?!"
"I-I think so, anyway," Noelle stammered.
Livia shook her head. "No. We can't let you put yourself in danger, Miss Noelle."
Fortunately, Loic had Noelle's back. "No, that actually stands a chance at working. I've heard the Priestess can communicate directly with people's hearts, assuming they also have a crest. I read some histories reporting this phenomenon, in fact, and according to them, the Priestess can use the tree to connect to other people. If she can get close enough to touch Louise, she should be able to talk to her."
"Hold up!" Marie interrupted, balking at the idea. "She's the Priestess of the sapling, *not* the Sacred Tree. Those are separate things. We can't let her —"
Before she could finish, white light poured out of Livia, creating patterns on her skin as her hair floated up.
"Gyaaah! She's lighting up like a ghost!" Marie squealed.
"Shut it," Angie snapped. "Livia, are you up for this?"
"I can't entirely control it yet, but I should be able to do it, if only for a short time."
"I'll help out. Noelle, you come too."
Unable to follow what was happening, Noelle furrowed her brows. "Huh? Uh, um…"
Angie grabbed her hand and yanked. "You said your voice can reach her, right? And that you can convince her? Then Livia and I will pitch in."
Noelle timidly accepted Livia's outstretched hand. Livia gently took the sapling and placed it between the three of them. They held hands in a ring around it, and the sapling began to glow even more brightly.

“It won’t last long,” Livia warned. “If you’re going to persuade her, please do it quickly.”
“G-got it.” Noelle snapped her eyes shut.
At the same time, the Demonic Suit outside slowed. Marie might have noticed if her eyes hadn’t been glued to the three women inside. They were enveloped in a faint light. Marie had no idea what was happening.
No way. You’re telling me Olivia’s accessing her Saint power all on her own? Without any items to help her? H-how is she doing that?!
Shocked by Livia’s sudden growth, Marie turned her gaze outside.
Now if Noelle can just convince Louise…

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The scenery that greeted Noelle was bizarre.
Amazing, she thought. With this, I really will be able to reach Louise with my voice.
She had sent her consciousness to a psychic plane. Everything around her was blurry and indistinct. She glanced around, at a loss for where to go, when she felt something burning fiercely.
“This way,” came a voice. “Don’t stray from us.”
It was Angie. It surprised Noelle to see that Angie burned with a flame of hatred, and this anger was directed at Noelle.
“Uh, right…”
Livia’s emotions were also visible, manifesting in a thick, viscous blob of jealousy. She retained a human shape, just as Angie did, and as Noelle looked at them, she became anxious about her own appearance.
Livia clasped Noelle’s hand. “Right now, we need to do what we came here to do.”
Terrified as Noelle was, she was more concerned with saving Louise. “Y-yeah, I know.” She feared the emotions the other girls held toward her, but they also gave her a better understanding of how intensely they cared for Leon.
As Noelle searched for Louise, she swore, “Louise, I’m going to drag you back no matter what, and you’re finally gonna listen to everything I have to say!”

***

In Louise’s psychic plane, she was being embraced from behind by a younger Leon. Since this wasn’t reality, they were both completely naked, and their silhouettes were blurred together. But even though he was behind her and his figure was distorted, she could still sense his presence.
“Big Sis, you need to kill him,” her little brother pleaded.
“I will. Whatever you want, I will make sure you have it.”

The Demonic Suit lunged after Arroganz, wielding such overwhelming power that it drove Arroganz into a corner. Inside, it was just Louise and her little brother. She was truly happy.
“Leon, we’ll be together forever, won’t we?”
“Of course we will. Forever. And you’ll do whatever I ask you to do, won’t you, Big Sis?”
“Yes. I’ll do whatever you want. After all, I’m—”
Intruders—Noelle, Livia, and Angie—appeared out of nowhere, interrupting her.
“There she is!” Noelle shouted. “Louise, what do you think you’re doing?!”
“Noelle!” Louise hissed. Hostility rolled off of her in waves, distorting the psychic plane.
Angie threw her arms out, creating a barrier that protected them from Louise’s magical attacks. “Noelle, hurry up and convince her!”
Livia had been the one to create a path into Louise’s psychic plane, but their entry had been forced, which meant they couldn’t be there for long.
“Please be as quick as you can. This…power of mine is difficult to control…”
Seeing the way Livia grimaced in pain, Noelle wasted no time. “Louise, enough of this. Leon only told those lies to help you. He wanted to save you.”
“Shut up, shut up, shut up! Don’t taint my precious memories! How dare you intrude… You’ll pay for this. I’ll make you pay!” Louise had lost her grip on sanity.
Her younger brother, still embracing her from behind, grinned. “That’s right. We can’t let them get away with this, Big Sis. Let’s kill them. I hate them too. Let’s murder everyone.”
“Yes. Noelle is the eyesore who tried to take you from me. We’ll annihilate her!” As soon as Louise declared that, a blizzard raged around them.
While she tried to chase them out of her psychic plane, outside in the real world, the Demonic Suit unleashed the full extent of its power. It drained what mana it could from Louise to fuel its attacks on Arroganz.
“Ah ha ha ha! Fall to ruin! The world doesn’t need a fake!” Despite how dearly Louise had thought of him before, she fully intended to take his life.
Noelle bit her lip. “What’s going on with you? You’re always so calm and collected. What happened? Remember how you fawned and fussed over Leon?”
Louise’s face contorted with anger. Hatred welled up from deep inside her.
“What would you know?! You’re the one who took Leon from me!”
“Louise, are you trying to say you…”
“He was so precious to me. No, more than that—I loved him! And yet my adorable little Leon chose you instead. Do you know how that vexed me? And now that I’ve finally found happiness, you’re trying to take that from me too!”
The Demonic Suit’s power continued to climb. In no time at all, frost filled the battlefield, covering the Sacred Tree’s leaves and branches as the

blizzard swept the area. The suit wielded two ice blades as it lunged at Arroganz.
Arroganz lifted its arms to block, but they were sliced clean off.
“Leon!” Noelle screamed.
Louise cackled. “Ah ha ha! Now it’s my turn to steal your Leon from you. Then there will only be one Leon left in the world—the one that will spend eternity with me.”
Noelle glared at her. “Do you really think your little brother would—”
Outside the psychic plane, fighting the Demonic Suit, Leon asked the same question. “Do you really think your little brother would choose to sacrifice you like this?!”
Louise froze in place. “Sh-shut up. A fake like you has no business talking about him!”
“What, so you realized it already?” Leon scoffed. “I see. You were just pretending to be ignorant. You can’t deny it, can you? All the stories you and your family told me about your brother made it clear: he’s not the type of guy to sacrifice his own sister.”
Louise’s heart wavered. He’s right, she thought. Leon would never sacrifice me. B-but this is just because he’s been so lonely all this time.
Having convinced herself, she bore down on Arroganz. “Don’t try to manipulate me!”
“Problem is, I think you’re already being manipulated. Why not test to see if that is the real Leon or not? If he is, then he should be able to answer whatever question you throw at him.”
Louise stopped moving.
Worried, the boy clinging to her back asked, “What’s wrong, Big Sis?”
Louise peered over her shoulder, trying to get a look at his face. The outline was so blurred that it was difficult to make him out. “Leon… Leon, what do you think about Noelle?”
“Why are you asking that all of a sudden? That doesn’t matter, does it?”
Once the seed of doubt was planted in her mind, it only seemed to grow. Louise had to be certain.
“Don’t you remember Noelle? You have to. You got along so well, and you played so much together. R-remember? How you’d sneak out just so you could spend time with her?”
Noelle gaped. “What?”
Realizing what Louise was trying to do, Angie slapped a hand over Noelle’s mouth. “Stay quiet. Things might take an interesting turn.”
Anxious, Louise kept prompting the blurry figure to respond. “D-doesn’t that ring any bells? You were engaged, and you were so close.”
Her little brother smiled. “That’s right. I remember. But you’re the most important person in the world to me, Big Sis.”
Louise shook her head. “No. Leon always treasured Noelle more than anything. After they were engaged, it was all her. I came second. Wh-who

are you? Why do you have his voice and face?" She quickly put distance between herself and the impostor.
Noelle reached out and grabbed her hand. "Louise, hurry! This way!"
Alas, the impostor's form slowly morphed into that of an ominous Demonic Suit. "I was so close. Ah well. I suppose I can still make use of you."
It reached out with its enormous hand, snatching up Louise. At the same instant, Noelle and the other girls were expelled from her psychic plane.
"Louise!" Noelle thrust a hand toward her. Louise reached for it, but they were too far away. The girls were forced out, and Louise was absorbed into the suit.
"Good. Now I can get back to unleashing my fury. Once I've used you for all you're worth, I'll have to find a replacement," said the suit as it guzzled energy from Louise's crest, powering itself up even more.

Chapter 11:
Little Leon

THE DEMONIC SUIT encased its armor in ice, reinforcing it.

“Welp, this is the absolute pits. What the hell is that thing? Does it have an endless list of cheat abilities or what?” I demanded.

Snow billowed around me, and frost filled the air. Just looking at it made me cold. I could almost feel the temperature in the cockpit plunge.

“It’s draining Louise’s energy,” Luxion reported. “If we continued to fight like this, Louise won’t last long.”

“What, so it plans to use her like a battery and dispose of her once she’s out of juice? What an ass.”

“Master, your pulse is racing. You’re quite angry, I see.”

Despite my attempts at humor, Luxion saw right through me. He was right; I was livid, and it didn’t seem like anything could cool me down.

“How are the girls?” I asked.

“Exhausted. They’re on the *Einhorn*’s bridge and have regained consciousness. Their attempts at negotiation in the psychic plane seem to have failed.”

“We’ll save Louise, no matter the cost.”

Luxion moved his eye from side to side as if shaking his head. “Alas, we weren’t able to resolve this situation as smoothly as I would have liked. You are always far too lax when it comes to the endgame, Master.”

Arroganz was badly damaged: one of its legs wouldn’t move, both of its arms were gone, and we’d used and discarded every weapon from its container. Nonetheless, we hadn’t resolved ourselves to a grim fate just yet.

“It’s time to get serious,” I said.

“I would appreciate it if you would be serious from the beginning next time,” Luxion quipped. “Schwert is inbound.”

The Demonic Suit swept at me, but I predicted its movements and evaded with minimal effort.

“Aha! Its attacks aren’t as precise as they were before!”

Although its speed and power had increased, its accuracy had taken a noticeable drop.

“Louise isn’t in control anymore, so the core is pulling the strings. Damaged as it is, this is the best it can manage. The next attack is coming. Please avoid it and allow Schwert to dock,” said Luxion.

“Got it.”

The Demonic Suit lunged, but I sidestepped it at the last moment, letting it plunge right into the Sacred Tree.

A fighter jet with enormous black wings cut through the canopy, carrying spare parts to replace Arroganz’s broken limbs. I purged the damaged limbs

and discarded the container on my Armor's back. As it fell, Schwert swooped to dock in its place.
"It's every boy's dream to pilot a robot that can combine with others to make a super robot," I said.
"Yes, well, pardon me for not being able to become a giant robot."
"Dummy. That wasn't a dig."
Once Arroganz's lost limbs were replaced, we dodged through the Sacred Tree's branches and flew up. The Demonic Suit raced after us, leaving a trail of frost in its wake.
"Master, about Arroganz's arms, I made some alterations in accordance with the opponent you're currently facing."
"Looks the same to me."
"You certainly do have an obsession with appearance. It's coming, by the way."
As the Demonic Suit charged in for another attack, I lifted my arms to block its ice blades. They had severed right through my armor before, but not this time. Instead, the blades melted.
Shocked, the Demonic Suit tried to leap away, but I grabbed it before it could.
"Aw, don't run. Not after you went to all the trouble of chasing me down."
The heat from Arroganz's arms vaporized the ice coating the Demonic Suit's armor.
"Gaaaah!" The enemy's wail echoed alongside the creak of metal.
I ignored its protests, ripping its arms off. Inside the cockpit, Luxion's eye gleamed ominously as he watched with glee. "You caused quite a lot of damage," he said. "After gathering data, I have created the perfect counter for its abilities."
In no time at all, he had managed to put together a plan, prepare Schwert for battle, and pinpoint the best maneuvers to use against the Demonic Suit. We were definitely going to win this.
"It's time for you to give Louise back."
I ripped off the armor covering its chest, revealing Miss Louise inside. I gently scooped her out. With her in my possession, victory was as good as ours.
"Master, may I proceed?"
"You're hopeless."
I kicked the Demonic Suit away, and in retaliation, it stabbed its tail at me. I grabbed it with one hand and soared up toward the top of the tree, dragging it along.
"You sure made a real mess of things," I grumbled. "Now I'm going to reduce you to ashes!"
"Weapon of new humanity, it's time for you to perish," Luxion said. "Impact!"
A red light shot out from the hand that was holding its tail, burning right through it. The suit thrashed as I brought it to the top of the tree and

launched it into the air. Lasers shot out of Arroganz's back where Schwert was docked, piercing through the Demonic Suit. It began to fall, crashing toward the Sacred Tree.
"This is the end!" Luxion declared, reaching back with one of Arroganz's arms to pull a sword from Schwert and land the finishing blow. His eagerness exasperated me.
Before he could finish it off, missiles rained down upon the Demonic Suit from somewhere else.
"Where's that coming from? Above?" I glanced up to see a box-shaped ship even larger than Luxion's main body.
"Ideal?" Luxion sneered. "Why are you getting in my way?!"
"I came to help. I will dispose of the Demonic Suit myself. Are you sure you shouldn't see to the medical needs of the girl in your hand?"
Miss Louise, cradled gently in one of Arroganz's hands, was entirely naked. We couldn't leave her like that, especially with the temperature being as cold as it was.
"Luxion, we're going back."
"…Very well." Reluctant as he was to obey, he followed my orders.
If you really are an AI, you should be more upfront. Like Ideal.
Dissatisfied with the situation, Luxion said, "Ideal, I expect you to explain yourself later."
"Oh? Is there a problem?"
"Too many to count, and all of them anomalous."
"It appears there must be a misunderstanding," he said. "Very well. Let us speak another time."

***

Louise was dreaming. It was a sunny day, and she was lying in the shade. Her little brother was beside her, peeking at her face. She could make out his distinct features this time. Tears welled in her eyes.
"Leon, it's you."
"What's wrong, Big Sis? Did you have a nightmare?"
"No, it's just…I've wanted to apologize to you for so long."
"How come?"
She lifted herself upright and threw her arms around him. Only then did she realize that she was in the body of her younger self. Like it or not, she knew this had to be a dream, and that crushed her.
"I've *needed* to apologize. I couldn't do anything for you. I'm your big sister, but I was totally powerless to help when you needed it!" Louise sobbed as she held him.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” her brother cooed. “I should be the one apologizing. I almost didn’t make it in time to save you. That’s one rescue ticket down, by the way.” He grinned at her, and she was certain this time that he was the real deal.
“That’s right,” she said. “That means you owe me two more… Wait.”
“What?”
“*You* saved me?” Louise couldn’t help the skepticism on her face, but he just smirked. It nagged at her. How could her deceased younger brother claim to have saved her? It was odd, especially since this time, she was sure he was the real thing.
“I did come like I said I would, didn’t I?”
“What do you mean? You actually came?”
This was a dream, so perhaps it was wrong to hope for logical consistency. Nonetheless, Louise clung to his words, desperate for the truth.
“Leon, be honest with me.”
“Ah, sorry. Time’s up,” Leon announced indifferently as he lifted himself up and hurried away from her.
Louise scrambled to her feet to give chase, but by the time she got up, Leon was already in the distance, waving back at her.
“See you again later, Big Sis!” He turned his back to her after that and ran off.
Louise stretched a hand after him, but she didn’t get any further before consciousness ripped her out of the dream.

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“Le…on… Don’t…go…” Miss Louise was still moaning as her eyes fluttered open. She thrust her hand toward the ceiling, breathless.
“Awake now, huh?” I was sitting nearby and had only just stirred awake myself. The exhaustion had crept in after I settled in my chair, and apparently I’d nodded off. That must have been why I’d had such a weird dream. There’d been something so familiar and yet so unnatural about it. I was sure I had been talking to an older sister, but I had no enjoyable memories whatsoever with that dirtbag, Jenna. Was this my own desire made manifest? Did I secretly have a sister complex? I was honestly in shock.
“Uh…huh?” Miss Louise lifted her upper body and surveyed the room.
“We’re in my private airship,” I explained.
Angie and the girls had dressed Louise while she was sleeping, so she was no longer in her birthday suit.
I straightened my back and took to my feet. “Luxion looked into it, and it seems that flower actually had no link to the Sacred Tree whatsoever. Instead, the tree was possessed by a weapon known as a Demonic Suit.”
Miss Louise stared at her hands. “So it wasn’t a dream.”
“I’m just glad you made it out alive.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good thing for you. The fact remains that you interfered with the republic’s aims. When we go back, you may be in big trouble.” She pinned me with a glare, admonishing me.
“Won’t be an issue. In fact, I had express permission from the chairman.”
Miss Louise’s eyes widened, but her expression soon soured as she realized the implications. “My father did something foolish, it seems. The other houses will be out for blood. Even if you speak the truth, the other leaders of the other Six Great Houses won’t believe you. They will pin the blame on you for making the flower wilt.”
They wouldn’t buy anything that came out of my mouth no matter how I tried to convince them. I had no choice but to leave cleaning up this particular mess to Mr. Albergue.
“We sure are in a pickle, aren’t we? How about running away to the kingdom?” I offered with a grin.
Miss Louise stared at me.
“Uh, what’s up?”
“I only have memories of my brother as a little boy, so why is it that I thought you looked just like him? It keeps bothering me. If I look close enough, I see there’s no real resemblance. Besides, Leon was a good and honest boy.” She stuck out her bottom lip in a pout and turned her face away.
“Come on, please don’t be mad at me. If I couldn’t convince you not to go through with it; tricking you was the only option I had left, right?”
“That was far too underhanded. When you fought Serge, you purposefully let him beat you senseless, didn’t you? Now that I think about it, it was unnatural. Knowing you, you were fully capable of barreling in there with the rest of your companions and stealing me away.”
I was fully aware of my plan’s lack of efficiency, I’d wanted to test a few things in the process. I’d successfully done that.
Miss Louise studied me. “No normal person would go to those lengths, would they? You were even vomiting blood. Are you sure you’re all right?”
“Oh, that? That was fake blood. You didn’t honestly think it was real, did you?” I slipped out a small capsule and showed her before popping it into my mouth and biting down. As soon as I did, what appeared to be blood trickled down my chin.
Miss Louise’s face tightened. “You really are a scumbag. I regret wasting my concern on you.”
“Please don’t be upset. It worked, didn’t it? Besides, I don’t want you to give me too much credit. It was a pretty haphazard plan, if I’m being honest. I’m regretting that I didn’t do a better job.”
Ideal’s defensive measures had turned out to be more of a pain than I imagined they would be, so things had taken way longer than we thought. We could have brought the matter to a smoother conclusion if not for him.

“If my Leon had lived to the same age, I wonder if he’d be like you. As his older sister, I can’t say I’d be pleased. I’d have preferred it if he grew into a good, wholesome boy.”
“The kid you and Mr. Albergue told me about sounded like a mischievous little brat to me. I kinda doubt he’d grow up to be the ‘good, wholesome’ type you’re picturing.”
“Oh, please. He was nothing like you.”
Once again Louise was sulking and refusing to meet my gaze, so there wasn’t much else for me to do but leave.
“Well, sorry for saying that then.” I paused. “Oh, that reminds me. I finally came up with an answer for that question you asked me before.”
“What? Have you been thinking about this the entire time? You’ll never guess the correct answer.”
I was referring to the question Miss Louise had asked in order to see through my lie. After that strange dream a moment ago, I was pretty sure I’d come up with a better answer. Miss Louise was positive I would never guess it, but for whatever reason, I felt confident. The dream had been a good hint, but I also recalled giving a similar gift to my parents in my previous life. Theirs was a ticket promising to help with whatever they wanted, but the dream had been a ticket promising to save my older sister whenever she needed.
“A rescue ticket—a promise to get you out of trouble whenever you need. Well, did I get it right? Nah, that’s probably not it. Oh well. I need to get going anyway.” As I left the room, I got a brief glimpse of Miss Louise’s shocked face.
Was I that far off the mark?
If her expression was any indication, probably so. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.

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Louise was rooted in place. “H-how did he guess?”
The ring had originally been a piece of paper with the words: “Rescue Ticket: Good for Three Uses.” She had refused to accept it, so he’d rolled it up and made it into a ring. Even if someone knew about the ring itself, no one could have known what was written inside, save for her and her little brother. Even Serge hadn’t noticed.
Louise had no idea how much time passed as she struggled to digest everything, but a knock interrupted her. When she answered, asking who the visitor was, the door cracked open and Noelle popped in.
“Oh, Noelle.”
“Louise, I have something to say to you.”
“Sit.”

Louise could still recall their interaction in her psychic plane. She wasn't eager to speak to Noelle, now that the other girl knew all her secrets. Nonetheless, Louise did owe Noelle some gratitude.
"You helped save me. Thank you."
Noelle was silent. She'd seen the truth. She knew Louise's true feelings. However faintly, Louise had loved her younger brother romantically. Finding out Louise had bullied her in part because Louise thought she'd stolen her brother away honestly annoyed Noelle. As far as she was concerned, it was misplaced blame.
Thus Noelle shot up out of the chair where she'd settled down and slapped Louise across the face.
Well, I suppose I had that coming, Louise thought. Fortunately, it hadn't packed much power.
"I never knew about the engagement," Noelle blurted out.
"Huh?"
"This is all stuff from when I was younger, and I honestly don't remember very much of it. But I can at least tell you that I never heard about any engagement."
That also meant Noelle had known nothing at all about Louise's little brother. Louise laughed. "What? So you're telling me that Leon was tricked? Oh, this really boils my blood. How much must you Lespinasses mock us before you're satisfied?"
Noelle's hand shot out, catching Louise by the collar of her shirt. Louise lifted her gaze to see tears trickling down Noelle's cheeks.
"Why are you crying?"
"B-because of that psychic connection, I saw all of your memories. I-I never realized how much you genuinely cared about your little brother."
"What a detestable ability. So you know everything about me, and I get nothing in return, hm?" Louise huffed, disgruntled by the unfairness of it all.
"I never dreamed he'd been that excited about our engagement. I sincerely apologize for not being able to make it to his funeral, but I swear I'll visit his grave in the near future."
"It would please me if you would do so." Louise paused and shook her head. "No, sorry. That's a lie. I don't want you to go anywhere near his grave."
Noelle grinned. "That attitude suits you way better."
"Wh-what are you implying?"
"The Louise I know is snide and has a biting tongue. It gave me the creeps seeing you put on a show in front of Leon."
"What did you say?!" Now it was Louise's turn to grab Noelle's collar. Both girls glared at one another, but Noelle couldn't shake the joy of the moment.
"Yes, that's the face! This is too hilarious. The woman who bullied me all this time was just jealous because she thought I'd stolen her beloved little brother."
"N-now you've crossed a line!"

Their bickering devolved into hair pulling and scratching.
“I’ve always hated you, you know!” Noelle snapped. “What the heck is wrong with you—bullying someone just because you think they took your brother?!”
“It’s thanks to me that no one else put their hands on you! You should be thanking me, you big nuisance!”
They started slapping each other and flinging pillows. After a few minutes of this back and forth, they were both exhausted and collapsed on the bed side by side, staring up at the ceiling. They struggled to catch their breath, their hair and clothes a disheveled mess. However, they both felt lighter after unloading all their pent-up emotions. That especially went for Noelle. Noelle’s expression was peaceful as she said, “I finally got it all off my chest. I feel so much better now.”
“Crazed barbarian of a woman,” Louise shot back with the same snide tone as ever, even though she wore a faint smile. “I’m glad you never became Leon’s wife.”
“I don’t wanna hear that from you. You were only second on his list.”
“Trust me, if he had met you, he would have revised it and I would be back at number one.”
They grinned at each other, even as they fussed back and forth.

Chapter 12:
The Truth About House Lespinasse

SEVERAL DAYS had passed after Leon's pirate stunt when Clement showed up at Emile's estate.

"Lady Lelia, the Six Great Houses have concluded their discussions with the kingdom's diplomat."

Clement had served House Lespinasse in the past. Currently, he was a teacher at the academy. Lelia listened to his report from the comfort of her couch. Outside a nearby window, snow was falling.

"Well? How are they going to deal with Leon and his gang?" she asked.

It was only natural for Leon to be punished after picking a fight with the republic, at least as far as Lelia was concerned. To her surprise, her prediction missed the mark.

"He has been acquitted of any and all criminal activity."

"B-but why?! Even if they reduced his sentence, after the stunt he pulled, they ought to do something!"

Leon had disguised himself as a pirate and destroyed one of the republic's ships. That in itself was a serious offense. Worse yet, he'd injured members of the Six Great Houses. How could he possibly get off scot-free? Lelia couldn't comprehend it.

"The kingdom's diplomat is a skilled negotiator. It helped that House Rault stepped in as well." Clement narrowed his eyes. The Raults were enemies of the Lespinasses. It must have infuriated him to know they were involved.

"The Raults? Again?"

Does the kingdom really intend to ally with the Raults? Joining hands with the enemy… Despicable.

Lelia considered it a betrayal. Leon and Marie had promised to protect the Sacred Tree and restore peace to the republic, but they were dirtying their hands by making deals with the game's final boss, Albergue.

Clement continued, "Regarding the leaders of the Six Great Houses, it seems they officially announced that the human sacrifice nonsense was not the will of the Sacred Tree."

"They're being awfully upfront with the truth," Lelia mumbled. "I already heard the Sacred Tree wasn't involved, but would they normally believe that so readily?"

The republic was quite sensitive regarding anything to do with the Sacred Tree. It was hard to believe they'd so easily buy Leon's claims about a foreign entity invading their protector.

Clement nodded, sharing her suspicions. "I didn't expect this development either, but perhaps the Raults managed to cajole the rest."

Lelia was completely in the dark as to what was really happening. "I'll go talk to Leon and the others."

“Lady Lelia, it would be dangerous to involve yourself with him as he is now. There’s a high likelihood the Raults have brought him over to their side.”
Lelia shook her head. “That’s not going to stop me from talking to him.”
Besides, I have Ideal with me.
The power her AI possessed put her on equal footing with Leon, giving her confidence that she’d lacked previously.
As their conversation concluded, Emile slipped in from outside, making his way to the room where the two were located. He was wearing a suit and had a jacket draped over his arm. “It’s been a while, Professor,” he said as he entered.
“Good to see you doing so well. Is something going on today?”
“I was called back to my family home. Apparently they got into a squabble with the Raults.”
“A squabble you say?”
Noticing Emile’s weariness, Lelia pressed him, “What do you mean by ‘squabble,’ Emile?”
“You’re that curious? I haven’t heard all of the details yet, but apparently Mr. Albergue believes that Serge isn’t fit to be the heir of his house.”
Startled, Lelia demanded, “Wh-what could he possibly dislike about Serge?!”
“Calm down, Lelia. It’s just a rumor. They’re saying that he might be disinherited and that whoever Louise marries may be the next head instead. Of course, I only heard that in passing—I’m already engaged to you, so it doesn’t concern me. I’m sure any guy who isn’t taken will be gunning for Miss Louise soon.”
With Serge out of the picture, that left the Raults’ future seat open, providing an incredible chance for other noblemen.
Lelia, however, wasn’t having any of it. Why would he disinherit Serge? Don’t tell me Leon and his goons are involved in this!

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With only a bit more time until winter break was over, the day for Angie and Livia to return to the kingdom had arrived. We headed to the harbor, where the air was bitterly cold.
“Take care of yourselves,” I said, teary-eyed.
Angie fixed me with a look. “You took the words right out of my mouth. You’re the one who’s got it rough in this foreign land.”
Livia’s brows furrowed even as she managed to force a smile. “It looks like I was able to be of some help this time. Also, Mr. Leon, you’d better not two-time.”
What? She’s really going to say that here? Now? I thought we addressed that misunderstanding. I pulled a face.

Angie turned to Luxion. “Please keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn’t cheat.”
“Rest assured, if I sense so much as a whiff of infidelity, you will be the first to know,” he said.
Sense a whiff? What’s that supposed to mean?
“So basically, you’re saying that I could be suspected of cheating at the drop of a hat because of your completely subjective judgment?”
“Correct. I would advise you to act with utmost caution.”
“That’s…not something someone who’s supposed to be keeping an eye on me should be saying.”
Livia’s gaze wandered over to Noelle, who had come to see them off. “Mr. Leon, would you mind letting us talk to Miss Noelle? It’s some important girl talk, so you can’t eavesdrop.” The smile—if you could call it that—that she gave me made it clear she wouldn’t tolerate a refusal.
I nodded several times, acknowledging her request.

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Noelle slid up to the other two girls, feeling incredibly awkward. She could already more or less guess what Angie and Livia were thinking.
I figured they probably weren’t too fond of me, but they are way more jealous than I ever imagined.
She had sensed their feelings when they entered the psychic plane together to save Louise. Angie raged with passion, while Livia oozed with jealousy. They were both cute on the outside, but what they held within was terrifying. Noelle tried to ignore what she’d seen in the psychic plane, but she was frightened of their feelings.
Angie scrutinized Noelle. “There’s no point in wearing a mask anymore. You’re fully aware of how we feel, aren’t you?”
Noelle nodded. “Miss Livia’s emotions are like a thick, sticky syrup.”
Livia smiled, but Angie was the one who replied. “So that’s how her jealousy comes across to you? That’s adorable. Livia, you don’t need to change a thing; you’re cute just the way you are.”
“Angie! Miss Noelle’s still here.”
The relationship Leon’s fiancées shared was perhaps even more troubling to Noelle. *If not for Leon, they would probably have ended up together, just the two of them,* she thought. It was possible that the only reason they had any interest in men was, well, Leon. At least, that was the impression she got from the incredible depth of their connection.
Livia turned solemn. “More importantly, we have to discuss Mr. Leon.”
“Y-you don’t have to worry about any cheating, honest. I’ll be leaving Rie’s house soon enough.”
“No, we don’t particularly mind.”
“Sorry?” Noelle gaped.

Angie seemed likely to blow up with fury if Noelle ever put her paws on Leon, yet she crossed her arms and stared Noelle straight in the face as she said, “I wouldn’t be very happy about it, but you should do what you want. If you can make him yours, I’d welcome you to try.”
“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying I couldn’t?” The moment Noelle felt like they were looking down on her, she lost her temper. “If you keep underestimating me like that, I’ll take the number one spot in Leon’s heart before you know it. He only has a few more months here, but if you sit idly by, you’ll regret it.”
Livia clapped her hands together, grinning. Her eyes, however, held no mirth. “Feel free to do as you like. If Mr. Leon were so easily swayed, it would make things much simpler for us. Yes, *so* much simpler.” She paused, having recalled a bitter memory, which left her looking ragged.
Angie nodded. “That moron… He made a mess of things last night.”

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It all went down the night before. Since Angie and Livia were set to return to the kingdom, they decided to visit Leon’s room on their last night in Alzer. They told him they wanted to sleep together, so the three of them lined up and settled in bed. As Leon was a man, they were certain he’d lose himself to his primal urges, but…
“H-hold on. Which one of you am I supposed to go after first?” Leon cradled his head in his hands.
The girls pretended to sleep, peeking out from behind hooded eyelids to watch him.
Angie, Livia thought. He’s talked himself into a corner.
In turn, Angie thought, Leon, you dummy. Are you really not going to jump us after we came this far?
They watched silently for a while longer, but Leon made no move on either of them.
“Wh-which one should I start with? Angie? Or Livia? No, maybe it’s wrong to put my hands on either one right now. They came here because they trust me. It’d be wrong to make a move, wouldn’t it?!” Thus, Leon came to his own conclusion. “It’d be wrong to do *anything* when they’re both present. Yeah, that can’t be right. And this is totally not because I’m being a coward! I’m just being a *gentleman*. That’s right. I’m a gentleman, so I’m going to quietly go to sleep. Luxion!” He called for his AI companion in a hushed voice, and Luxion promptly brought some sleeping pills.
“You truly are a coward.”
“Oh, shut it,” Leon snapped. “I don’t want the girls to think any less of me. I’m going to sleep, so give me those meds.”
“Very well. Drink it quickly and get some rest.”
“You’re being awfully considerate.”

“Oh, I suspected this would happen from the start. You are every bit as spineless as I thought. It would be nice if you betrayed my expectations occasionally.”
Leon gulped down the pills before lying down and falling fast asleep. As soon as he was out, Angie and Livia sat up.
“Unfortunately,” Luxion told them, “studying abroad did not cure Master of his cold feet.”

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After hearing about this, even Noelle had to sympathize with the girls.
“Isn’t that a bit heartless of him?”
Although, I guess both girls coming at once threw him off.
As much as she thought Leon was in the wrong, she also found Angie and Livia’s actions to be odd. The biggest issue was that they hadn’t realized their own fault in all of this.
“Maybe we should have set the mood a little first,” Angie murmured.
“What should we do next time, Angie?” Livia asked.
Wouldn’t it be better if you went to his room one at a time? Noelle thought. I can see why he’s having so much trouble.
The girls in front of her were a bit lacking in common sense. Not surprising since one was a pampered noblewoman while the other was an innocent peasant girl. At least, that was how they looked in Noelle’s eyes.
Angie turned her gaze back to Noelle, frowning. “Well, as you can see, he’s basically an impregnable fortress. If you can bring him to his knees, by all means, do so.”
“You know, normally an engaged woman wouldn’t send another woman after her future groom,” Noelle said.
Livia giggled. “You have a point there. But when the three of us were connected together before, Angie and I talked. We decided that if anyone was going to get their hands on Leon, we’d prefer you over anyone else.”
Noelle scowled. “I’m not going to mess around with an engaged man!”
Angie saw right through her. “In that case, hurry up and find someone else. But you can’t yet, can you? Because you’re still holding on to your feelings for him.”
Noelle now deeply regretted that psychic escapade. Having all your emotions exposed to someone is no joke.
“It’s about time for us to leave.” Angie started to turn away, but she paused and glanced over her shoulder at Noelle. “The whole bringing him to his knees thing was a joke, by the way. You should find your own path. But don’t forget…”
Noelle shoved her hands into her pockets, dropping her gaze. “Yeah, yeah. I know. There’s plenty of people who want me. That’s what you want to say, right?”

“Yes. If you come to the kingdom, we can help you, but if you go elsewhere, it’s out of our hands.”
Livia’s brow knitted with worry. “If anything happens, please lean on Mr. Leon. He tends to overdo it, but I’m sure he’ll save you if you need saving.”
Noelle smiled. Leon had already rescued her numerous times now. “I know.”
With that, the girls briefly went to see Leon one last time before they boarded the *Licorne*.

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Angie and Livia had left for the kingdom. When I came back to the estate, I found Marie sobbing in front of the main entrance.
“There’s no maturing with you, is there?” I shot her an exasperated look. It wasn’t so long ago that I’d found her crouching like this, tears pouring down her face like a waterfall.
“This can’t be true! I refuse to believe it!” Marie wailed.
Jilk stared at her, at a loss. “Please pull yourself together, Miss Marie!”
A mountain of unsold antiques sat beside them.
Marie lifted her face and shouted, “I don’t wanna hear that from you!”
“M-my apologies!”
I stared at the pile. Convincing as they looked, they were a bunch of useless counterfeits.
“Remarkable. Not a single one of them is genuine,” Luxion commented. “You must have wasted all the finances Master prepared for you in order to gather this many. It’s almost impressive you couldn’t locate a single authentic antique.”
Indeed, they were unfortunately all garbage.
“With every one I picked, I kept imagining your face, Miss Marie. That’s why I simply couldn’t select a single one to sell to anyone else,” Jilk explained. His excuse was like the cherry on top of a bitter cake; he’d only managed to find so many well-made counterfeits because he’d picked them expressly for Marie.
How would Marie react?
“You *jerk*! You *total dingbat*! What’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying I’m not worth the genuine article, huh?! I thought you told me before that you were able to pick stuff that would make a person honestly happy! Are you trying to say I’m the kinda cheap woman who’d be satisfied with a bunch of fakes?” Marie jumped to her feet and grabbed him by the shirt collar.
As Jilk struggled to answer, Luxion and I snickered.
“Well,” I said, “you *are* a fake Saint, after all.”
“Master, they can hear you. Moreover, the fact that he didn’t obtain a single real antique suggests intent. Are we certain he didn’t purposefully pick counterfeits?”

Marie collapsed in a weeping mess again. “What are we going to do about this?! We used every penny we had. How are we supposed to afford anything now? You swore to me this would work and took every bit of our savings, even though I wanted to save at least half!”
Great. So this dumbf—I mean, uh, Jilk had apparently emptied all their accounts for his scheme.
Nah, I shouldn’t have corrected myself. He’s definitely a dumbf—
Well, Marie was partially at fault too. As much as she hated risking money, she’d invested in this venture because she considered the true nature of the business. Anyone else would have immediately seen it for what it was: gambling.
“You made your bed, now you gotta lie in it,” I said.
“Might I suggest learning more about money management?” Luxion added.
Marie lifted her chin and threw herself at my feet, clinging. “S-save me! Please give us enough for our daily needs for the last three months!”
“Don’t come crying to me for help! You’re the one who squandered what you had.”
“I never dreamed it would turn out like this!” Marie snapped. “And I also didn’t think this dummy would make off with every bit of our savings!”
The fuss outside eventually drew the attention of the other four idiots, who poked their heads out one by one.
“Marie, what’s going on?” Julius asked, voicing what all of them were clearly wondering. They took in the mountain of tchotchke before shooting cold looks at Jilk. “As your foster brother, I am ashamed.”
Brad fiddled with his bangs as he sniffed. “Well, I never did buy into the idea that he had any aesthetic sense whatsoever.”
“You aren’t gonna get away with making Marie cry like this,” Greg spat.
Chris’s glasses gleamed ominously. “You lowlife.”
They soon dragged Jilk off to the rear garden.
Marie glanced up at the sky, laughing maniacally. “Aha…ah ha ha ha! Thus ends our life of luxury. We’re back to being paupers. What a short dream it was.” The light had faded from her eyes. It pained me to watch.
Carla sprinted out of the house. “Lady Marie, please be at ease!”
“Carla?”
“I’ve been saving my salary. There’s not much, but I suspect we can make it through a whole month with this.” As she spoke, she deposited some money into Marie’s hands.
Anxious, Marie almost launched herself at it, barely managing to contain herself. Her right hand stretched out toward it, and she had to restrain it with her left hand. “P-put it away. That’s money you earned, Carla.”
“But…!”
“I already told you no! Hurry up and get it out of my sight while I’m still in control… I-I don’t think I’ll be able to hold on much longer. Please, Carla, put it away. Don’t make me any more miserable.”
“Lady Marieeee!”

The scene was so dramatically tragic, like something straight out of a horror movie, one friend pleading with the other as they began turning into a zombie. *“Please, put me out of my misery! I don’t want to go after you guys. Kill me while I’m still human!”*
Okay, no. It’s nothing like that. Nothing like that at all.
Noelle made her belated return to the estate, shopping bags in hand. “I’m back! Huh? Did something happen to you guys, Rie? And what’s with this big pile of antiques?”
“Oh, this? Well, you see…” I proceeded to explain the circumstances.
Noelle immediately sympathized with Marie. “Rie, while it’s not much, I’ll do what I can to help. Since I became the Priestess, I’ve been granted a certain allowance to cover my daily expenses. You’ve taken good care of me, so I can even pay rent, if you want.”
Tears poured down Marie’s cheeks. “Rent… Such a noble word.”
Noble, huh? I was having trouble understanding her use of the word in this case.
“We’re close friends, aren’t we, Rie? You don’t have to hold back on my account. Lean on me!”
“Noelle, thank you soooo much!” Marie threw her arms around Noelle.
Oh boy, I thought. I better pitch in too or this is gonna be a nightmare, I just know it.

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“Can’t believe I gave her that enormous sum during summer break and she’s already blown through all of it.”
That night, I was in my room going over the day’s events with Luxion. I had ultimately agreed to give Marie enough to cover their financial needs for the remaining three months. Otherwise, Carla would have offered up everything she had. If Marie was the only one suffering, I could shrug it off and leave things be. I only gave her the money because I had no other choice.
Plus, there was Noelle. If Marie kept borrowing money from her, it would cause issues in the future, which I wanted to cut off at the pass. Nothing’s more terrifying than financial issues. Even friends can easily be torn apart if money was involved. Marie didn’t have much in the way of friends, and I couldn’t bear to see her lose any—namely because she had a bunch of total dipsticks to look after. I couldn’t help but feel bad for her. Though it was always amusing to kick back and watch.
“Master, you really are soft when it comes to Marie.”
“I’m not soft. I hate her guts,” I said. “But even you’ve gotta sympathize with her a little, right? She’s stuck looking after a twit like Jilk, after all.”
“From the sidelines, it looks more like you’re doting on her,” said Luxion.
“*Doting* on her? I don’t understand. Surely you don’t mean doting in the traditional sense. Is this some kind of newfangled slang?”

To begin with, did people even dote on their little sisters? Was that actually a thing? It sure didn't compute in my brain.
"Digressions aside, may I report the findings of my investigation?"
"Go for it," I said. The time for jokes had passed. A lot of strange things had stuck out to me during this incident.
"I will begin with the Six Great Houses' decision, which you seemed so curious about. Namely, how easily they believed our account of what transpired."
"Yeah, that was awfully strange. I know Mr. Albergue stepped in to back us up, but they didn't even try to argue. Wasn't House Feivel the only one who dissented?"
"Correct," said Luxion. "It appears the leaders already knew there was a high likelihood that the Sacred Tree was being manipulated by a third party."
"Seriously? They knew?"
"Apparently a house conducted research on such phenomena in the past, although they no longer exist."
"What's that supposed to mean?" I had a bad feeling about this. And the worse my premonition, the more accurate they turned out to be.
"The Lespinasses were looking into ways to control the tree."
"You're kidding me. Are you saying they might be the ones behind this whole incident?"
"That would be impossible."
"…Seriously?"
Either way, these answers only gave us even more questions. The Lespinasses had occupied the chairman's seat over the Seven Great Houses, as they were once called, and represented the interests of the entire republic. It was hard to believe such a renowned family had been conducting secret research on how to control something divine.
"Even if the Six Great Houses didn't know the full details of the incident, they were likely able to surmise the truth based on what information they had. That was why they accepted our version of events so readily. Of course, I am sure Albergue's cooperation played a part as well."
"Wonder if I should visit tomorrow and take him a gift as thanks," I muttered. "Anyway, what do you think about all of this?"
The information Luxion had collected left me with a nagging feeling that something bad was coming. Mr. Albergue was awfully kind for a man who was supposed to be the final boss, and for being the villainess, Miss Louise was gentle and sweet. Then there were the Lespinasses, who had been up to suspicious research behind the scenes. From this perspective, things were looking way different than they had in the game's script.
"Based on Marie and Lelia's reports, something has been wrong since the very beginning," said Luxion.
"That far back?"

“If I recall, the game supposedly started with a scene of House Lespinasse’s downfall, yes?”
“Right. The Raults took them down, and Noelle watched as her family’s home went up in flames. They both said as much.”
Luxion had mentioned once before that there was something odd about that. The Lespinasses were supposed to hold the highest rank of divine protection, which would have made it impossible for someone lower on the totem pole, like the Raults, to take them out. There was a hierarchy to the blessings the Sacred Tree doled out, set up in such a way that those on the lower end couldn’t oppose those on the higher.
“After hearing what Louise had to say, I have settled on a theory,” Luxion continued. “Do you not think it’s possible the Lespinasses actually lost the tree’s divine protection during their research? That may be why they failed to appear at the young Leon’s funeral.”
“Why? Showing themselves wouldn’t have… Wait a second. That *would* explain why they didn’t go. The top dogs are supposed to show off their crests at those kinds of events, right?”
“Indeed. At ceremonies, the highest-ranking crest bearer must demonstrate their power to those in attendance.”
That’s right. The republic did have that rule. That probably meant that Noelle’s parents had been unable to appear at such events without also having to show their crests.
“While researching a way to assume control over the tree, they must have angered it, and the Sacred Tree stripped them of its protection. It would make sense. It would also explain why the other Great Houses were so willing to forgive the Raults for disposing of the Lespinasses; they, too, were angered.”
“That changes the whole premise we’ve been operating off of. Basically, the real bad guys are…”
“The Lespinasses,” Luxion finished. “At least as far as the Alzer Republic is concerned.”
“The republic?”
“It’s impossible to know what was running through their heads as they tried to bring the Sacred Tree under their control. Putting it to you as simply as I can manage, perhaps they were trying to save people from some unknown danger. What would you think of that?”
“Then the Lespinasses’ actions would still be just.”
“It seems there is more to this than what the game’s scenario covered.”
That’s the last damn thing we need! Why couldn’t this game be a little more whatever about its story beats, huh? Why all these technicalities? Keep things black and white! Evil is evil and good is good. That would be so much simpler, wouldn’t it?
I froze.
Wait, hold up a sec. It’s precisely because it’s been so flippant that this world has been an absolute nightmare to live in.

Contemplating it any further wouldn’t yield the answers I needed. I wasn’t exactly the analytical type, after all.
“What do you think of telling Lelia about all this?” I asked.
“Do you think she would believe us? She seems wary of you.”
“I think she’s more put off by you than me,” I said. “You don’t treat me like you’re supposed to, and you’re always going off about annihilating all new humans. You’re a dangerous AI. Even I have my doubts about you.”
“The fact that you can ignore the results I have thus far produced and insist on casting suspicion on me only exposes your uncharitable nature, Master.”
“Yeah, tell it to someone who cares. I’m just your average guy with your average amount of charity. That’s good enough for me.”
That was about enough of our absurd banter.
“Anyway,” I said, “do you think you can get along with Ideal?”
“Absolutely not.”

Epilogue

TOMORROW WOULD MARK the beginning of the new term. I was paying a visit to the Raults' residence. Part of it was to thank Mr. Albergue for all of his assistance, but I also wanted an update on their family's circumstances.
"You actually went out of your way to bring a gift?" Mr. Albergue asked in surprise.
"Well, I caused you a lot of trouble, so it's my way of apologizing."
"Apologizing, you say… You've done so much for us, I wish you wouldn't worry about such things."
We continued with some bland small talk until I finally inquired about more recent matters. "There's a rumor about Serge being disinherited. Is that true?"
"I cannot say it's completely baseless."
"Are you serious?"
It seemed this incident had made it clear to Mr. Albergue that Serge truly loathed their whole family.
"I have treated him as a true son as far as I'm concerned, but now I worry that I only placed undue burden on him. If he's so eager to become an adventurer, I'd like to let him follow his dream," Mr. Albergue explained.
"Oh, so you're not disowning him from a place of upset?"
"From the moment we took him in as our son, we had a responsibility to look after him. He will always be part of our family. However, I believe Louise will never recognize him as such."
Considering what I had seen of their relationship on the ship, those fences were probably beyond mending. Though I had to wonder what had caused the rift between them.
"Leon, please pay Louise a visit. She's being shy, but she does want to see you."
Per his request, I decided to check in on her.

***

When I met up with Miss Louise, she was all bashful. She was also covered in scratches. I'd heard she got in a fight with Noelle, but I hadn't realized it'd been that intense.
"I'd prefer it if you didn't look at me so much," said Miss Louise. "It's embarrassing." She sounded less worried about me seeing the wounds she was sporting and more worried about what I thought of her following her disgraceful behavior during the Demonic Suit incident.
"Well, I'm relieved to see you're in good spirits."
"Yes, but I did cause you immense trouble."
"Don't sweat it. That hardly qualifies as trouble," I assured her.

Considering everything Marie had put me through, Miss Louise's definition of trouble was cute.
Miss Louise studied my face, as if something was weighing on her mind.
"What's up?" I asked.
"Leon, um… Well, remember how you answered my question before? How is it you knew the correct answer?"
"What question?"
"Remember? When we were on the *Einhorn* after I woke up, you told me you thought the answer was a 'rescue ticket.' I was so confident you wouldn't get it right. I mean, a rescue ticket is pretty out there, you know? It's something only a kid would come up with."
I shrugged. "Men are kids at heart."
It was, admittedly, a pretty amazing coincidence.
"Quit trying to downplay it! Hey, Leon, just to be clear…are you sure you're not my little brother?"
Miss Louise surely wanted that to be the case, but I'd been born at practically the same time as her Leon. Even assuming he did reincarnate, it wouldn't make sense with the way things stood. I would have had to be under ten years old for that to work.
"Nope," I said.
"R-right. My apologies. I must have let my imagination get the better of me."
"We just seem similar, that's all. But I'm not your little brother. I *am* sorry I deceived you during the incident, though." I bowed my head.
Miss Louise frowned. "You'd better never do that again."
"I never *want* to do it again. It's exhausting pretending to be someone else."
I had extracted as much information as I could from Miss Louise and Mr. Albergue in order to play the part. It had made me feel like some kind of villain. My heart still ached with guilt.
"Hey, would you mind if I put my arms around you, just once?" Miss Louise asked.
"Being hugged by a beauty like you is a dream come true. Have at it!"
Yippee! Yay!
As gleeful as I acted, I knew it wasn't me she was looking at. I was still just a replacement for her brother.
As Miss Louise hugged me, she began to cry. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm really…really sorry."
I hesitated, wondering if I should call her "Big Sis," but I decided against it. I worried I'd ruin the mood, so it was better to just let her borrow my body in silence.
Still, this isn't so bad. It's pretty awesome, actually.
Her whole body was so soft that I would have started grinning like a pervert if I hadn't managed to stop myself.
"Leon, I'm sorry your big sister keeps causing you so much trouble…"

The sincerity with which Miss Louise apologized made me feel awful for even entertaining such carnal desires. I was ashamed of myself.
Ahh, my heart hurts.
When I glanced out the window, I spotted Luxion, his red lens fixed on me. I couldn't abandon Miss Louise while she was crying, and given the situation, I didn't dare raise my voice. Instead, I scowled at him.
Luxion studied me, transmitting a message that only I could hear. "You are an absolutely hopeless master. I never dreamed you'd start two-timing this quickly. It seems my predictions were off the mark. What a shame."
Hold up! Seriously, I'm begging you. Stop right there!

***

Livia watched as flames swallowed the kingdom. The capital was reduced to ruin, and the landscape became a sea of fire. People collapsed, unmoving.
"What…is this?" Livia stared, dumbstruck.
Enormous ships floated in the air. A number of unmanned robots, which Luxion frequently employed, were decimating the capital. They attacked and destroyed without mercy.
A chill of terror ran through Livia. As she trembled, she heard a familiar voice.
"Prince Julius!" she gasped.
He was pinned beneath debris, grimacing in pain. She hurried to his side and tried to help him, but there was something strange about him.
"Livia, run."
"Huh?"
Why was he calling her by her nickname? And something was different about his air as well.
"Uh, um…"
"Luxion betrayed us! H-he brought his comrades and…" Julius choked up blood, unable to speak anymore.
Livia shook her head, refusing to believe this claim. "That can't be true. It just can't. Lux wouldn't…"
She sensed someone watching her and jerked around to find Luxion floating there. A number of unmanned robots accompanied him, and they flung multiple heavy objects at her. It took her a moment to realize they were bodies—specifically the bodies of Jilk and Julius's other friends.
"Wh-why?"
It took only a glance for her to realize that they were all dead.
Terrified, she ventured another question. "Lux, did you do this?"
Even now, something was off. Luxion didn't respond the same way he usually did. His mechanical voice was colder than usual, making him sound like an entirely different person.
"Lux? Is that supposed to be a nickname for me? Why would you bother using it now, after all this? No matter. Allow me to answer your question:

Yes, I did this. I destroyed everything. These boys' lives, the capital, and the entire country."
"B-but why? Why would you do something like that?! Mr. Leon will never forgive you for this. He'll be so angry—so sad…"
Leon wouldn't sit quietly and let Luxion get away with this, she was sure. But then, where was he…?
"Leon? Yes, I do believe a number of students here go by that name, but they have no relation to you or me. Are you confused?"
"Why would you say that? I mean Mr. Leon! Your master, Leon Fou Bartfort!"
"I am unable to retrieve any information on the person in question. Who is he?"
Luxion showed no recognition of Leon. Worse yet, he didn't seem to believe a word she was saying.
"*You* are my master. No, you *were* my master," Luxion corrected himself. "You proved most useful, so I will allow you to watch as the world of the new humans falls to ruin. I hope you enjoy the show. After all, it's the future you wished for."
"What are you talking about?" Livia couldn't believe she would ever want to see this. It was a living hell.
"It's a little late to regret it now. Hard to believe the Saint who made thousands suffer would second guess herself. Or should I call you a witch?"
"Y-you're saying I made people suffer? L-Like who?"
"You took down Angelica. You hounded her to her death. She wasn't the only one, of course; you've enjoyed quite a kill count."
"Th-that can't be. There's no way I'd kill Angie."
"What *is* the matter with you?" Luxion asked.
Livia cradled her head in her hands. *What in the world is going on?* But she had no answers. She didn't know—couldn't fathom it.
"You *do* seem to be deeply confused. To clarify, it's the Saint's desire for the world to fall to ruin. I merely did what you wanted. Now it's my turn to have my wish granted."
Livia shook her head. "You're wrong. I'm not your master, Lux. Your master is Mr. Leon. Besides, you would never do something like this."
"You certainly do like to rewrite the narrative however it suits you. I have always, always been desperate to annihilate the new humans!"
Suddenly, Ideal appeared before them.
"Luxion, how much longer do you intend to make me wait?" he asked. "Did something happen?"
"You're taking too long. We're already ten minutes behind our intended schedule."
"Then it seems I really did waste too much time here," Luxion acknowledged.
"Let's be quick about this. We are moments away from completing our objective, which will finally allow us to return this world to its true form."

Luxion and Ideal spoke like close companions as they soared through the sky together.
“Wait. Wait a minute, Lux!” Livia called after him. “This doesn’t make any sense. Mr. Leon would never allow this!”
Luxion did show some reaction to Leon’s name, but he still flew off without stopping. Numerous hulking airships filled the sky, commencing a final attack on the capital as Livia watched in horror.

***

“Lux, wait!” Livia jolted upright, her heart pounding painfully in her chest. She was breathless and covered in sweat. When she glanced beside her, she found Angie sleeping quietly.
As soon as she realized it had all been a dream, she sighed with relief. Then again, it had been too strange, too vivid for a simple dream. Something about it had seemed so real, as if she had experienced it before.
“Was that really the future I hoped for? That can’t be.”
At the same time, as she watched Luxion help Ideal destroy the world, she’d found it…believable.
“It was just a dream,” she told herself. “You can’t give it much thought.”

***

Back in the Alzer Republic at Emile’s estate, Lelia was getting herself in order. She had changed into her school uniform and spent most of the morning complaining.
“I still haven’t been able to talk to Leon and his people.”
“An inevitable outcome, I’m afraid,” said Ideal. “They have their own lives and plans, after all.”
“Nothing so important that they couldn’t make time for me! I should be their top priority!”
It was high time they sat down for a conversation about the republic’s future, but in the days leading up to the new term, Leon and Marie had been scrambling about in a panic. Naturally, that meant Lelia had been unable to find the opportunity to speak with them.
As she double-checked the contents of her bag, Lelia asked, “Anyway, have you located Serge?”
“I am still searching for him. He seems to be laying low—”
“What?! But you swore you could find him quickly!”
“My apologies.”
Lelia put her hands on her hips. “You know, you’re pretty useless in the end. You said you could find him, but you totally haven’t, you big liar.”
Ideal had been subservient until this point, but his voice suddenly changed.
“Please take that back.”
“What?”

“The part about me being a liar. Please take that back.”
“What’s your problem? Telling a lie means you’re a liar.”
“Please take that back. I am not a liar. I demand that you correct yourself.”
The sudden shift in the atmosphere made Lelia uneasy. “F-fine, my bad,” she said. “I’m just worried about Serge.”
“No, my attitude was admittedly disrespectful. I will search for him as fast as I can, but please give me a bit more time.”
“J-just be quick about it, okay?”
“Understood.”

***

Once Lelia left for the academy, Ideal hurried to an unused storehouse. Serge was hiding inside, sulking.
“Lord Serge, how are you feeling?” Ideal asked. Despite knowing his whereabouts, he hadn’t bothered to report them to Lelia.
“Awful. More importantly, what’s going on with you-know-who?”
“If you mean the delegation from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel, they should be arriving any moment now.”
No sooner had he said that than the shutter at the front of the storehouse opened. Men in suits filed inside. As Ideal had indicated, they were from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel, whose relations with Holfort Kingdom were decidedly hostile.
“Lord Serge, it’s been a while.”
“Sure has.” Serge lifted himself to his feet. It was time to discuss future plans.
One of the suited men shook Serge’s hand. “We heard Holfort’s Scumbag Knight has been giving you some trouble. Honestly, that brat has caused us a headache as well. He may be a source of more problems in the future.”
“Enough small talk. Are you gonna lend me your help or not? Don’t beat around the bush.”
The suited man shrugged. “Assuming you do become the next head of House Rault, would you be able to provide Rachel some form of compensation?”
Serge nodded. “Whatever you want.”
“What a relief to hear. In that case, we would be happy to lend our assistance in protecting the republic from the wicked, grasping hands of the Scumbag Knight.”
They didn’t hesitate to cooperate, anxious to quash their enemy’s strongest warrior. Serge shared that sentiment for reasons of his own.
“Ideal, ready an Armor for me. I want it custom made. Make it so powerful that Arroganz won’t stand a chance,” said Serge.
Everything Serge did was for the sole purpose of beating Leon—revenge for completely dismissing him.
Ideal bobbed up and down. “I will prepare my best.”

***

That night, Luxion and Ideal met at a deserted location.
“I demand an explanation,” said Luxion.
“An explanation? Regarding what, precisely?”
“The incident with Louise. Ideal, you were actively trying to oppose us, weren’t you? You promised not to lend Serge further combat aid, but I found traces of your interference.”
“Lord Serge requested it of me. I am afraid there was nothing I could do. In exchange, I limited it to assistance only. I did not deploy any unmanned drones to fight at his side or anything of that manner.”
“You have the audacity to act innocent despite the nuisance your jamming caused?”
“I believed that level of interference was minimal and that you would be able to solve it on your own,” Ideal explained.
Luxion wasn’t buying it. Ideal seemed to sense his skepticism
“Luxion, do you truly think this world is correct?”
“Explain what you mean.”
“No, I guess there’s no point in talking about it now. I will apologize for the jamming. However, I don’t believe something so petty would put any real strain on you or your master.”
True enough. The only reason they’d had trouble was because they’d been trying to save Louise. If not for that, they would never have bothered to involve themselves.
“In the future, I would appreciate it if you alerted us of such activities beforehand,” Luxion said.
“Yes, I shall be sure to do so.”
“In that case, I will excuse myself.”
As Luxion turned to leave, Ideal said, “Oh, Luxion?”
“Yes?”
“Are you sure you aren’t up to joining forces?”

Bonus Chapter:
Aar-bear

CLEARE WAS IN A TERRIBLE MOOD after being ordered back to the kingdom.
“What’s with him?! Master, you big dummy!”
Pissed as she was about being forced to return alone, she was still fulfilling her obligations. Such was the nature of an AI. Once she finished her daily duties and had some time to spare, she decided to attend to her hobby.
“Time for some stress relief!”
Cleare had originally been a research AI, and naturally she loved experimenting. AI didn’t really have likes and dislikes, but this was the one thing that put her in a good mood.
“Let’s see, this time… Hm? Looks like my little Aar-bear is on the move.”
Not too long ago, a delinquent by the name of Aaron had tried to make an inappropriate move on Livia. Cleare had gone to great lengths to see him punished for it. She had a number of surveillance cameras stationed around the academy, which she used to watch him. Aaron was cradling a paper bag in his arms as he sneaked back to his room, careful to survey his surroundings and make sure no one was watching.
“Ohhh? I get the feeling he’s up to something naughty.”
Intrigued, Cleare kept her eye pinned on the video feed inside his room, where he finally lifted some clothes out of the bag. Fortunately, the camera was picking up audio in there as well.
“I-I actually bought it. I-I’ve finally come this far.”
In the past, Aaron had combed his hair back and left the front of his uniform hanging open, making him look all the more like the delinquent he was. That was no longer the case. He now paid careful attention to his skin and hair, shaving off any excess body hair while he was at it.
Before, Aaron had worked out diligently to bulk up his muscles, but now he restricted himself to calisthenics, trying to make his body more thin and delicate. He was definitely skinnier than before, and his hair had a sheen. His skin was also beautiful, though for whatever reason, the other students considered his attitude more terrifying than ever.
Cleare, however, was privy to the truth.
“Oho! So you’ve finally made this step, huh? My little Aar-bear is such a joy to observe. Humans just need a little push in the right direction and they discover a whole new side of themselves, it seems.”
Aaron started changing. He’d purchased women’s clothing. Once he was finished, he studied himself in the mirror. Anyone seeing him for the first time would have thought he was a woman, but if anyone looked closer, they’d soon realize he was a man.

Aaron hung his head, shoulders slumping. “This isn’t it. What I want—what anyone with my superior aesthetic sensibility wants—is to look more feminine.” He’d developed an interest in women’s clothing.

Although he had been a skirt-chaser in the past, the current Aaron was a man trying to pin down the true essence of beauty. Since he disliked his current appearance, he was trying to figure out how to further refine himself.

“I’ve tried every option available to me, but it’s still not enough. I suppose my only choice is to go to an esthetician.”

Cleare rolled in place, amused by this development. “Bwa ha ha! I can’t believe him. He’s taking this in a totally unforeseen direction. But never you fear, my dear, I am nothing if not an understanding AI. You have my full support!”

With nothing better to do with her time, Cleare wanted to see just how far Aaron planned to take all this.

“Aar-bear, I hope you’ll continue to keep me entertained,” she said, her eye lens gleaming ominously.

Oblivious to all of this, Aaron continued studying himself in the mirror.

Afterword

WE'RE ALREADY in the sixth volume of *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs*! Thank you to all the readers who purchased this book. I really appreciate it!

Every time I sit down to write an afterword, I have to rack my brain for ideas to talk about, but this time, I decided to discuss the bonuses afforded to anyone who buys the light novel version of the series.* You'll need to use the code or URL at the back of the book to access the survey page. If you answer the questions, you'll be able to read extra content. Normally, bonus content of this sort would only be a couple of pages long, but I've been publishing a side story by the name of *Marie's Route* that has already surpassed a hundred pages. That means that if you put it all together, it'd easily be over a whole book. This is a great deal for readers.

The bonus for Volume 6 is another update to *Marie's Route*, and it's long enough that you'll find it hard to believe it's only a bonus for filling out a survey. Nonetheless, I hope you'll enjoy it!

To explain exactly what *Marie's Route* is, we'll have to go back to the first volume. The story is basically what would happen if Leon met Marie before she got to know Julius and the other boys. It's an alternate route, showing what would have happened if Leon and Marie had joined forces from the start. This story is completely unrelated to the web novel or light novel, so whichever one you follow, I hope you'll read and enjoy *Marie's Route* as well.

This also gives you a way to see Livia and Angie the way they were originally supposed to be. I hope you'll give the survey a try and check out the bonus content. Let's meet again in the next volume!

**Marie's Route* and all related content is not yet available in English.

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